

# IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

## Digital Repository

---

Retrospective Theses and Dissertations

Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and  
Dissertations

---

2001

## Interactive reading models and reader response criticism: tracing parallels between reading theories in applied linguistics and literary criticism

Samuel D. Miller  
*Iowa State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd>



Part of the [Applied Linguistics Commons](#), and the [Psycholinguistics and Neurolinguistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Miller, Samuel D., "Interactive reading models and reader response criticism: tracing parallels between reading theories in applied linguistics and literary criticism" (2001). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 286.  
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/286>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

**Interactive reading models and reader response criticism:  
Tracing parallels between reading theories in applied linguistics and literary criticism**

**by**

**Samuel David Miller**

**A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS**

**Major: English (TESL/Applied Linguistics and Literature)**

**Program of Study Committee:  
Roberta Vann (Major Professor)  
Brenda Daly  
Robert Hollinger**

**Iowa State University**

**Ames, Iowa**

**2001**

**Copyright © Samuel David Miller, 2001. All rights reserved.**

**Graduate College  
Iowa State University**

**This is to certify that the master's thesis of**

**Samuel David Miller**

**has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University**

Signature redacted for privacy

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Applied linguistics and literary criticism defined	5
Sharing historical parallels	7
CHAPTER TWO: THE ROOTS OF INTERACTIVE READING MODELS FROM BEHAVIORISM TO PSYCHOLINGUISTICS	9
Behaviorism: Mechanical response to textual stimulus	9
Leonard Bloomfield and mechanistic linguistics	10
B. F. Skinner and verbal behaviorism	13
The influence of psycholinguistics on reading	17
Kenneth Goodman: The reader and the guessing game	18
Frank Smith: Making sense of reading	25
David Rumelhart: Interaction and schemata	30
CHAPTER THREE: THE READER TAKES THE STAGE: FROM THE OBJECTIVE TEXT TO THE READER'S RESPONSE	39
New Criticism: The poem stands alone	40
I.A. Richards: Emotion as the means to interpretation	41
Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren: The poem stands for itself ...	44
René Wellek and Austin Warren: ... and the reader must step aside	46
Louise Rosenblatt: Exploring the reader's voice	50
Reader response theory: The merging of the reader and the text	59
Interpreting reality: From objective to subjective	60
Reflexivity: The paradox of meaning	65
<i>The Wizard of Oz</i> and intertextuality	70
Not everything goes	72
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION	76
Recognition in the research: Which hand knows what the other is doing?	77
Postmodern credibility: Affirmation from the L2 classroom	81
REFERENCES	86

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips; - not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself.

- Henry David Thoreau

Though Thoreau himself merely follows a long historical line of those who have been completely enraptured with the act of reading, only since the early part of the twentieth century have the cognitive processes involved in reading been given prominent status in the disciplines of literary criticism and applied linguistics. And only since the middle 1960s has the individual reader's interpretation of what she reads shared center stage with the text. Part of what this thesis seeks to explore is how two academic disciplines, both concerned with the meaning of language and the mechanics of the reading process, have covered so much of the same ground during more or less the same period of time. It also explores how both disciplines can reach similar conclusions and develop very similar theories, yet through nearly two decades of rigorous academic publication remain remarkably isolated from and unaware of what was developing in each other's respective areas. Theories in philosophy, psychology and linguistics have all contributed to the development of reader response criticism in literary criticism as well as interactive reading theories in applied linguistics. However, with only a few exceptions, these two disciplines have rarely turned to each other in order to support and advance their respective theories.

Thoreau is giving quite an honor to reading, when one considers that this is an activity that is more or less second nature to members of literate societies. However, this passage from *Walden* is not free from contradiction. If we accept that the word can be “breathed from all human lips” and “carved out of the breath of life itself,” then we have to reject the notion that a written word, regardless of how archaic and out-moded its use might be in contemporary times, is merely a relic. *Relic* suggests a fragment or remnant from a past that no longer exists. Even if it bears usefulness in helping connect our present to the past, it remains separate from the present, essentially deceased. To be breathed, on the other hand, suggests being alive and immediate, a part of life happening at this very moment. We talk of “keeping the classics alive.” When *Hamlet* is performed, it is unlikely that we see ourselves as bringing down from the shelf and dusting off a four hundred year old relic. Instead we understand that we are experiencing art that not only resonates within our culture, but continues to shape our cultural soul whether we experience a version performed in original Elizabethan costume or modernized in three piece suits and leather motorcycle jackets. For Thoreau, what makes words more intimate as well as more universal than any other art is that in reading, the reader is actively giving meaning to the text, inhaling the text and exhaling meaning, or breathing as he puts it.

In the broadest metaphorical sense of interpretation, anything can be text. A painting or piece of music is read and interpreted, as are the clothes people wear, as are dinosaur fossils and gathering storm clouds; in a sense we are reading all of the time. And rather than language being seen as a mere semiotic representation of reality, it might be that it is not only the most honest and direct way of expressing and experiencing

reality, but is ultimately our only connection to reality itself. Whether or not spoken language was invented or biologically acquired, the fact that there are oral cultures with no written means of communication indicates that literacy systems are social constructs. Yet they were constructed for the purpose of expressing and conveying meaning, getting at the essence of existence. And if, as Thoreau suggests, reading can be carved out of the breath of life itself, then it is a very individual and personal experience. We each must take from the oxygen of reality and breathe our own life.

The purpose of this thesis is to review some of the primary literature instrumental in the development of interactive reading theory in psycholinguistics and reader response theory in literary criticism, examine the parallels between them and discuss how they have been used in the field of applied linguistics. Both theories focus on the background knowledge of the reader as a necessary element in the interpretation of texts, and both developed from previous theories in which the goal of interpretation was to approach texts as objectively as possible. Because interactive reading models and reader response criticism each evolved from previous linguistic and literary movements, I will also review these theories. Specifically, a discussion of the behaviorist theories of Leonard Bloomfield and B. F. Skinner will precede the section on the psycholinguistic developments of Kenneth Goodman, Frank Smith, and David Rumelhart; it is these latter three who have created the foundations upon which interactive reading models are based. Then a brief review of the crucial works of the New Criticism movement in literary criticism will precede the section on the critics who galvanized reader response criticism as a dominant pedagogical theory in the 1970s and 1980s. However, summary of the work of Louise Rosenblatt will be sandwiched between the New Criticism and reader

response reviews. I am organizing my discussion in this manner primarily in the interest of chronology. Rosenblatt first presented her theory of a transactional model of reading at the same time that New Criticism was building up steam. It is her work that set the stage for reader response criticism that would not explode until more than thirty years later.

Had I begun my graduate career in literature alone, it is unlikely that I would have ever stumbled across the theory of interactive reading models, or have ever been aware of the field of applied linguistics. I have come to the assumption that my situation is more the rule than the exception, and that instances of scholars making a transition from second language teaching to literary criticism are few and far between. I entered the TESL/Applied Linguists program at Iowa State University because I had been teaching ESL as a part-time, adjunct instructor. Because my undergraduate work was in English literature, and I had a specific interest in postmodern theory and fiction, I was excited when I had the opportunity to revisit some of these works in a pedagogical proseminar as well as take a literature class to fulfill my coursework requirements. To my surprise, few if any of my colleagues in the program had either any significant background or interest in literature. Two years later, when I added a second specialization in literature to my degree, I found that my colleagues in this field had even less knowledge of applied linguistics.

In reviewing reader response criticism, several themes will be discussed. One will be the difficulty of defining meaning through the use of language, which will segue into the reflexive nature of writing about reading. Within the context of the postmodern climate in which these theories were developed, it becomes apparent that language cannot



objectively define itself; yet language is the only medium of description available to us.<sup>1</sup>

The thesis will conclude with a review of how concepts of these theories have been applied to second language classrooms, and finally, a discussion of the implications a revisiting of these theories could bring to both the second language and literature classrooms in the future.

### **Applied linguistics and literary criticism defined**

Edward Finegan (1994) refers to applied linguistics as a branch of the larger field of linguistics that "applies the findings of the discipline to real-world problems. In *educational* matters they [applied linguists] apply their knowledge to understanding the acquisition of literate aspects of language (reading and writing) and the acquisition of second and foreign languages" (p. 15). The last part of this definition has made applied linguistics, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with the discipline known as second language acquisition (SLA). Quite likely, the largest and fastest growing area in SLA is the teaching of English as a second language, commonly known as ESL or EFL (English as a foreign language). Though this acronym applies to the teaching of any language (i.e. Spanish being SSL or SFL), because of the growing prominence of English throughout the world and its acceptance as the international language of business, ESL has by far become the largest part of SLA. For the purpose of this thesis, the use of the term

---

<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism in literature has always been and continues to be a nebulous term. One of the primary issues it addresses is the indeterminacy of text, contingent on the subjective perspective of the readers based on their personal experiences. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be referring to the work of reader response critics as postmodern. In fact at times it may seem that I am using the terms *postmodern* and *subjective* interchangeably. This may be ambiguous, but another topic that comes up frequently in postmodern texts is the phenomenon of reflexivity. If ambiguity is a characteristic of postmodernism in literature, then it might stand to reason that any definition of postmodernism would be ambiguous, in itself a reflexive twist.

“applied linguistics” will be considered synonymous with SLA, ESL and any other work in the study of language learning. Another common abbreviation used to determine the difference between a person’s first and second language is L1 and L2. An L1 is considered to be a speaker’s native language; any other languages she knows are all considered to be an L2 regardless of the number. Thus, if a native Spanish speaker is also fluent in Portuguese and French and is studying English, all three of these latter languages are regarded as L2s.

Beckson and Ganz (1989) define criticism as, "The evaluation of literary works, including classification by genre, analysis of structure, and judgement of value" (p. 51). Literary works are generally understood to be novels, poems and plays, though by the time poststructuralist theories take full root, philosophical, historical and theological works, as well as literary criticism itself, can become objects open to literary interpretation. How terms such as *poem* and *text* are used in criticism can be as varied as the critics using them, and these definitions often become crucial in determining how some theorists distinguish their theories from those of others. In one instance a poem might refer to any artistic piece of writing, and in another case it might be the event that occurs while the reader makes meaning of a text. In many ways, the lack of interdisciplinary communication might be due to the variance in working definitions of key terms by any given theorist or vice versa. For example, the term *interaction* not only has various meanings within the respective realms of literary criticism and applied linguistics, but it also varies within applied linguistics alone depending on what aspect of language acquisition is being discussed. It could mean an interaction between students in a classroom, interaction between different mental functions within the student or

interaction between the student and learning material. Louise Rosenblatt (1985), for one, is adamant that there is a distinct difference between the terms *transaction* and *interaction* when referring to the relationship between reader and text and that the former term is more appropriate. At the same time, critics such as Wolfgang Iser (1978) use the latter term in the same context.

### **Sharing historical parallels**

Interactive reading in applied linguistics and reader response criticism in literary criticism were theories that developed primarily from the mid 1960s through the early 1980s, and since that time pedagogical methods which have developed from these theories have become second nature in literature and language learning classrooms. The premise of these two theories was an acknowledgement that the reader as well as the text is central in creating meaning. In many ways, they can be seen as a reaction to other dominant approaches in the study of language and learning throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Previous thought surrounding the reader/text relationship tended to see the text as a stationary object that acts on or impacts the reader. Through their formalist approach, the New Critics saw the text as completely autonomous, its meaning existing independently of not only the untrained interpretation of the reader, but also from the author's intentions and the historical context in which it was written. Behavioral psychology viewed reading as the act of subjects responding to external stimuli; a text triggers mental processes in a reader that had been established and reinforced by previous stimuli, which, when combined with the current text creates the reader's response. While in one sense behaviorism stresses the importance of past experience and background

knowledge in the creation of a reader's reaction to a text (a concept that is central in the subjectivist models being reviewed), the indication is that such reactions are more involuntary than voluntary. This thesis will explore how the postmodern literary critics and applied linguists throughout more than twenty years of similar or identical academic research remained all but unaware of each other's work. This oversight is interesting, not only because these two academic fields had actually found a common topic to examine, but also because the impetus that led to these conclusions came about due to the similar climates that had previously dominated both disciplines for so long.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE ROOTS OF INTERACTIVE READING MODELS FROM BEHAVIORISM TO PSYCHOLINGUISTICS**

### **Behaviorism: Mechanical response to textual stimulus**

The history of linguistics as a discipline is very brief. While it is true that semantics, the meaning of language, has been studied and analyzed in Western civilization since Plato and Aristotle, it was not until early in the twentieth century that linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce approached the study of language using scientific methods, and the discipline of semiotics or semiology, the study of signaling systems, was established (Crystal, 1997; Cobley & Jansz, 1997). Despite its recent development, linguistics has mushroomed as an academic discipline, spilling over into other disciplines from philosophy to psychology to literature. It is not the goal of this thesis to review the entire chronological history of linguistics or literary criticism. Instead I will focus primarily on those sources which most closely represent the theoretical state of these fields of study which lead to the development of interactive reading models and reader response criticism.

Both interactive reading models and reader response criticism developed in reaction to previous theories that sought to forge linguistics and literary criticism into disciplines of scientific objectivity. In linguistics, it was the work of behaviorists such as Leonard Bloomfield and B. F. Skinner that preceded the field of psycholinguistics, the latter being the discipline from which interactive reading models developed. Therefore, it will be necessary to review in some detail the major premises of these two theorists in order to illustrate the impact of the shift in perspective of the psycholinguists.

### Leonard Bloomfield and mechanistic linguistics

One of the most influential theorists of the early period of modern semantics was the American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, whose book *Language* (1933) would become one of the foundations of structural linguistics. Bloomfield thought language should be analyzed and classified by its physical characteristics because it is the difference in sounds combined with meaning that makes up language, and this defines the study of linguistics. "To put it briefly, in human speech, different sounds have different meanings. To study this co-ordination of certain sounds with certain meanings is to study language" (p. 27). What Bloomfield was after was a more scientific and objective method of studying language, and saw his approach as a departure from the traditional, *mentalist* model of learning, "which is by far the older, and still prevails both in the popular view and among men of science, supposes that the variability of human conduct is due to the interference of some non-physical factor, a *spirit* or *will* or *mind* (Greek *psyche*, hence the term *psychology*) that is present in every human being" (p. 32). He replaces this with a new *materialistic* or *mechanistic* theory which "supposes that the variability of human conduct, including speech, is due only to the fact that the human body is a very complex system. Human actions, according to the materialistic view, are part of cause-and-effect sequences exactly like those which we observe, say in the study of physics or chemistry" (p. 32-3). Within this model, language and its use is something tangible, and thus its origin is something that scientists can get their hands around, study and analyze. The largest problem involved in such a task is the sheer variability involved in any single utterance whether spoken or written, but even when acknowledging the limitlessness of

variables involved in any attempt to scientifically define meaning, Bloomfield considers these in very materialistic terms:

Even if we had an accurate definition of the meaning that is attached to every one of the forms of a language, we should still face a difficulty of another sort. A very important part of every situation is the state of the speaker's body. This includes, of course, the predisposition of his nervous system, which results from all of his experiences, linguistic and other, up to this very moment—not to speak of hereditary and pre-natal factors. If we could keep an external situation ideally uniform, and put different speakers into it, we should still be unable to measure the equipment each speaker brought with him, and unable, therefore, to predict what speech-forms he would utter, or, for that matter, whether he would utter any speech at all. (p. 141)

As this passage illustrates, defining *meaning* is a problem that concerns linguists at every level, yet it is a goal for behaviorists such as Bloomfield to make meaning something tangible and finite. Such a goal, however, is for the most part abandoned by psycholinguists in following decades. For Bloomfield, the problem of scientifically defining meaning is that we have too small a grasp of every aspect of reality that comprises a person's environment and contributes to the utterances of language.

Therefore, to ever achieve a completely accurate understanding behind the meaning of language is next to impossible. Viewed from a mechanistic approach on the other hand, every aspect of language is considered a physical response to an environmental stimulus. The idea that language is the residue of some abstract, nebulous creation of the mind, a creation that cannot itself be defined, is the result of the mentalistic perspective, which

stops short of defining every aspect that is involved in the process of language production:

Adherents of mentalistic psychology believe that they can avoid the difficulty of defining meanings, because they believe that, prior to the utterance of a linguistic form, there occurs within the speaker a non-physical process, a *thought, concept, image, feeling, act of will*, or the like, and that the hearer, likewise, upon receiving the sound-waves, goes through an equivalent or correlated mental process ...

language is *the expression of ideas, feelings, or volitions*. (p. 142)

Contrary to such nebulous concepts is the mechanist view. Verbal expressions of meaning either function on a large-scale in which utterances we recognize as language are created when they occur on an “obscure” small-scale level where glandular secretions and muscular contractions are formed with no linguistic significance, or they occur as “soundless movements of the vocal organs, taking the place of speech-movements, but not perceptible to other people” (p. 143). The influence of experience involved in shaping each individual is described only so far as it enacts a physical response. Thus mental activity is also considered a physical response controlled by the nervous system. Regardless of whether one takes a mentalistic or mechanistic approach to explain how language is created, Bloomfield acknowledges that the entire process occurs within the individual and can only be explained to other individuals via language. In the end, even once we understand the process of how language is physically created, the riddles of meaning have not been solved, and all linguists ultimately deal with defining meaning. Bloomfield leaves us with a linguistic compromise. “Since we have no way of defining most meanings and of demonstrating their constancy, we have to take the specific and



stable character of language as a presupposition of linguistic study, just as we presuppose it in our everyday dealings with people" (p. 144). Having to live with indefinite definitions would become characteristic in the theories of later postmodern critics.

### **B. F. Skinner and verbal behaviorism**

Akin to Bloomfield's perspective of linguistics was that of B. F. Skinner, much of whose work became the hallmark of behavioral psychology. For purposes of tracing the move from behaviorism into psycholinguistics, it is best to keep the defining concept of behaviorism to its most basic, which is essentially the study of how subjects respond to external stimuli. It attempts to explain how learning results from organisms reacting to and being shaped by their environments. In short, there is nothing humans do that is not a reaction to some outside stimulus, whether it is hands lashing out to swat a fly, legs moving into locomotion to dodge an oncoming bus, salivating when the pizza delivery boy rings the doorbell, or muttering "Some stretch of weather we're having, huh?" in an attempt to make small talk in the elevator. Like any other physical response to the world around us, language, according to Skinner, operates in the same manner. We utter certain words, phrases, sentences, etc, based on environmental changes exterior to the mind. Dark clouds gathering in the sky provide the stimulus for one to respond "It looks like it's going to rain." The growling of an empty stomach would stimulate an utterance like "I'm hungry," or "I could sure go for a peanut butter milkshake." When applying this concept to the process of reading, the reader is a completely passive participant being acted upon by the text. Reading tragedy makes us sad or angry, while reading comedy makes us happy and joyous. What behaviorism overlooks that psycholinguistic theories would

later emphasize is the background knowledge that the reader brings to the text in order to be able to respond to what she is reading. If I have no idea what a Marxist coup is, then I do not know that I should be thrilled if I read in the *Des Moines Register* that office workers throughout the city have just enacted one on the state insurance industry.

Although Bloomfield is considered both a behaviorist and a structuralist, Skinner parts with structuralism in the sense that structuralism does not take into consideration the role the environment plays in the production of language. Structuralists observe what people do, but for the most part do not take into consideration the causes of given actions. In *About Behaviorism* (1974), he describes a speaker's external world as more than simply a collection of referents for which language must be invented to describe. Rather, they are contingencies that stimulate the response known as language:

The concept of stimulus control replaces the notion of referent with respect not only to responses which occur in isolation and are called words (such as nouns and adjectives) but also those complex responses called sentences ... The child responds in sentences to events in his environment—events involving more than one property or thing, or relations among things, or relations of actor and acted upon, and so on, and his responses contain elements which he never has any occasion to emit alone. The linguist assigns these elements to syntax or grammar. He does so as part of an analysis of the practices of a given verbal community, from which he extracts rules which may be used in the construction of new sentences. (p. 96)

It is in this oversight to the importance of the external world as stimulus where Skinner sees structuralists falling short in their study of language development. "If the

structuralists and developmentalists had not confined themselves so narrowly to the topography of behavior at the expense of the other parts of the contingencies of reinforcement, we should know much more about how a child learns to speak" (p. 100).

Noam Chomsky, the father of the structuralistic model of language known as transformational-generative grammar, became one of Skinner's harshest critics, and in 1959 wrote a review in the journal, *Language*, of Skinner's 1957 book, *Verbal Behavior*. While he acknowledges that the behavioral model of stimulus-response-reinforcement works well under controlled laboratory conditions, when it comes to language production under everyday, unregulated circumstances, the model does not hold up:

Other examples of 'stimulus control' merely add to the general mystification.

Thus a proper noun is held to be a response 'under the control of a specific person or thing' (as controlling stimulus, 113). I have often used the words *Eisenhower* and *Moscow*, which I presume, are proper nouns if anything is, but have never been 'stimulated' by the corresponding objects ... Suppose that I use the name of a friend who is not present. Is this an instance of a proper noun under the control of the friend as stimulus? Elsewhere it is asserted that a stimulus controls a response in the sense that presence of the stimulus increases the probability of the response. But it is obviously untrue that the probability that a speaker will produce a full name is increased when its bearer faces the speaker. (p. 32)

The reaction psycholinguists would have against Skinner's model is not so much that a person is affected by her surrounding environment to the point where she is a product of it, rather the oversight on the part of the behaviorists is that a person can also influence her environment. In the case of reading, this would result in affecting the meaning of the

text. In contrast, Frank Smith (1982) takes a cognitive view of learning, which holds that the mind acquires knowledge rather than simply reacts to external stimuli and reinforcement. He labels the Skinner Box (the laboratory arena where behavior was studied in rats and pigeons) "a cage." "The *behaviorist* view is that all learning is *habit formation*, and that the only data of importance are the observable circumstances in which habits are established. The *cognitive* view is that learning involves the *acquisition of knowledge*, and that what is interesting is the unobservable manner in which information is acquired and organized by the brain" (p. 215). The implication is that from a behaviorist perspective, there is no freedom of interpretation because any response can be traced behaviorally to past experience.

Skinnerian models of behaviorism sufficiently under-emphasize the importance of the reader's creative process in the act of reading, but Skinner has also written many commentaries and criticisms of the arts as well. Since the primary purpose of this thesis is to examine parallels between a theory of applied linguistics with a theory of literary criticism, it is interesting that one piece in particular falls in line with the thinking of the New Critics. Just as psycholinguistic theorists would reject many behaviorist ideas, postmodern writers of reader response criticism would also reject much of the objectivist claims of the New Critics. Skinner argues that creativity must be reflected in the work itself rather than from the efforts of the reader. In his 1934 critique, "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?" Skinner sees weakness in the automatic writing style of her modern piece, *Tender Buttons* (1914), because it is the reader who must give the work any significant meaning. "There are even fewer emotional prejudices. The writing is cold. Strong phrases are almost wholly lacking, and it is so difficult to find a well-rounded emotional

complex that if one is found it may as easily be attributed to the ingenuity of the seeker" (*Cumulative Record*, p. 362). That the reader must apply an ingenious mental effort to invoke meaning from the text not only proclaims a literary deficiency in the work itself, but implies that rigorous interpretation (or even casual interpretation for that matter) on the part of the reader is by and large unnecessary. This is in complete contrast to the perspective that not only later postmodern literary critics would take as to the importance of the reader's interpretive role, but also psycholinguists whose work in reading theory would develop into interactive reading models of applied linguistics. The next section will be a review of the theories of three of the most influential psycholinguists: Kenneth Goodman, Frank Smith and David Rumelhart.

### **The influence of psycholinguistics on reading**

Prior to the mid 1960s, reading was thought to be primarily a bottom-up decoding process, in that readers developed comprehension of text from the smallest orthographic units, letters to words to phrases. There was a primary focus on linguistic forms. For Rumelhart (1977), a process is bottom-up if "the information is initiated with the sensory signal and no higher level of processing can affect any lower level. The reading process is strict letter-by-letter, word-by-word analysis of the input string; there is no provision for interaction within the system. The processing at any level can directly affect only the immediately higher level" (p. 575). This implies that reading is essentially a passive activity. The reader is not negotiating with the orthographic input for meaning, rather she is merely decoding the input based on information which has been previously learned. The bottom-up process in reading is closely associated with phonological learning as

well. "The thought is that once learners are able to sound out the letters, they will be able to read the words, and then, once they are able to read the words, they will be able to make meaning of the text" (Hawkins in Celce-Mucia, 1991 p. 170). What is left out of such decoding models is the fact that in order for a reader to decode input from a phonetic to a lexical to a semantic level, there has to be a bank of semantic knowledge already stored in the reader's memory. In a strictly bottom-up model, the rate at which slower readers process graphemic input is too slow for previous input to remain in short term memory. This being the case, reading would amount to a kind of a treadmill process; the reader is always working from letter to letter and maybe from word to word, but is never getting close to acquiring meaning.

Where bottom-up processing is a matter of decoding input, *top-down processing* is a matter of encoding input, essentially giving meaning to text. This process is based on the reader's ability to make predictions about what the content of a text will be, and her level of ability is based on her knowledge of the language. Knowledge of the language includes an understanding not only of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, but also how these elements which make up the content of a text both change and influence the context of the text. The greater a reader understands of all these elements of language, the more efficient and effective a reader she is.

### **Kenneth Goodman: The reader and the guessing game**

The psycholinguistic work of Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith have had the most profound impact on top-down models of reading, and have laid the groundwork for following interactive reading models. Goodman developed some of the earliest theories

of what would become the interactive approach to reading in applied linguistics. In Goodman's landmark paper, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game" (1967), he rejects the validity of bottom-up reading models:

[T]he common sense notion I seek here to refute is this: 'Reading is a precise process. It involves exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns and large language units'... In place of this misconception, I offer this: Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are being confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progresses.

More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. It involves an interaction between thought and language. (p. 33)

Goodman's formal definition of reading (1975) refines the above quote and incorporates the acts of encoding and decoding:

Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs. There is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes language to thought. (p. 5-6)

While Goodman uses the term *interaction* in this depiction of the reading process, it is important to keep in mind that this is not yet the definition of most interactive reading models. At this point, Goodman is rejecting bottom-up models in favor of what he establishes as a top-down approach to reading. Top-down models of reading are

described in ways that closely resemble elements of literary criticism theories that stress the subjectivity of the reader. The interaction is occurring within the mental process, which is what gives *psycholinguistics* its name. Reading is an interaction between thought and language. The primary progression which remains a constant in Goodman's early reading model emphasizes the background knowledge the reader relies on to convert the lexical features of a text into a semantic understanding.

The process begins with the graphic input (text) which has been encoded by the author. At a reader's early proficiency stage of reading, text is recoded into oral output which simultaneously acts as aural input which is decoded into meaning. In other words, the reader reads out loud and makes meaning out of what she is hearing. As she becomes more proficient, recoding text to oral output and decoding it into meaning happen at the same time, and as the reader becomes more proficient at silent reading, recoding becomes increasingly secondary. Eventually, when she becomes proficient enough that recoding written words into spoken words is no longer involved in decoding for meaning, the act of oral reading takes place at the end of the process, after meaning has already been decoded from the page into her mind. What is important to keep in mind with this model is that during the process of recoding graphic input, nothing is involved on a semantic level. All the reader is taking in are black marks on a white background. It is the reader's knowledge of what these marks represent that enable her to give meaning to them.

In Goodman's revised model (1975), he sees the reading process working in a series of ongoing cycles. Rather than graphic input being an isolated act that leads to the next isolated act of the reader decoding the information for meaning leading to another



isolated act of encoding the meaning for output, the reader is constantly oscillating through optical to perceptual to syntactic to semantic cycles.

As a process, these cycles cannot be isolated from each other. "Like a living organism [language] loses its essence if it is frozen or fragmented. Its parts and systems may be examined apart from their use but only in the living process may they be understood" (p. 8). During the optical cycle, light reflects from the page and visual input is recognized as printed text which is scanned in the direction of the given language (i.e. left to right for English, right to left for Hebrew or Arabic, up to down for Chinese). The reader makes predictions based on her prior knowledge of the language, which segues into the perceptual cycle. From the reader's memory of the orthographic, syntactic and semantic aspects of the language, predictions made about the text are either confirmed or rejected. If rejected, an alternate prediction is made either at that instant or by going back over the preceding text. If confirmed, the reader moves on to the syntactic cycle. The reader is making predictions at a surface structure level. Is the sentence a question, a declarative statement or a command? If the prediction holds up, the reader assigns the sentence a deep structure (a meaning greater than the lexical symbols organized on the page) which moves the process into the semantic cycle. This final cycle is where everything comes together, but meaning is being predicted, revised and confirmed throughout the process. At any given point in the process, the reader's predictions about the orthography or punctuation of the text, or the syntax of the text is being rejected or confirmed based on her prior knowledge, her established schema of the language.

Prior to Goodman's reading process models, reading was thought to be primarily a word/recognition task, the assumption being that if the reader could recognize the words,

she could comprehend the text. However, there is nothing about the text to comprehend if she has no prior knowledge of how the letters on the page correspond to her knowledge of oral language (what Goodman calls a graphophonic relationship), or the syntax and wording of the written information (lexico-grammatical relationships). The text will only be meaningful to the point that she can connect what she sees on the page to what she has in her head. While the emphasis of this model is on the pre-existing schema of background knowledge the reader is bringing to the text, it is important to keep in mind that Goodman is taking into account word recognition at the very beginning of the reading cycle, so there is an element of bottom-up processing going on.

The bulk of Goodman's theories of reading processes have come about through his research in miscue analysis. It is through observing what readers actually do in their oral reading of real texts (texts not contrived for the purpose of observing people read them), that the process of creating meaning out of text is revealed:

Everything the reader does is assumed to be caused in this linguistic process. Unexpected events in oral reading thus reveal the way the reader is using the reading process itself. The term error is a misnomer, then, since it implies an undesirable occurrence. The term 'miscue' has emerged instead. A miscue is any observed oral response (OR) to print that does not match the expected response (ER). Miscue analysis reveals the reader's strengths and weaknesses and provides a continuous window on the reading process. (p. 103)

From this shift in perspective, we are presented with a new way of defining what an effective and efficient reader is. A reader is effective if she can construe meaning from a text, and she is efficient if she can construe it with a minimal amount of text, so a reader

who makes a lot of miscues is not necessarily a poor reader, but rather may be very effective. Because she is constantly anticipating what will be in the text and making meaning of what she is reading, some words may be substituted for others which are usually synonymous, or functional words may be added or deleted. These processes assist the reader in getting at the meaning. "Miscues are produced in efficient reading but they are likely either to leave meaning unaffected or be corrected by the reader. As efficiency increases, frequency of miscues tends to decrease but this is the result and not the cause of efficiency" (p. 104). If the goal of reading were simply word recognition, the process would be unendingly tedious, and whether or not the reader derives any meaning from the text would be secondary. It is possible to "read" both silently and orally, successfully pronounce all the words, even apply proper rising and falling intonation, and have no comprehension of what the eyes are glossing over or the voice is saying.

For an example, I will refer to a personal experience where I consciously caught myself in the midst of correcting a miscue in my reading. While reading Susan Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses* (1982), I came upon this passage:

The priority then is belief in (as opposed to continuous interpretation of) this singular figure for individual salvation. All of this was in direct conflict with the entire body of Jewish thought not only insofar as the identity of the messiah was concerned, but also the whole traditional method of interpretation of Scripture ... (p. 131)

The subtitle of the book is *The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*. Essentially, Handelman examines how the works of such twentieth century

writers as Freud, Lacan, Bloom and Derrida are not so much radically new ideas as they are in keeping with the traditions of rigorous Talmudic interpretation where, as Derrida is so often quoted, "There is nothing outside of the text." A miscue incident occurred in my reading of this passage. I made an initial substitution of the word *Jesus* for the word *Jewish*. I caught the miscue immediately, and re-read the sentence, but I also became aware of all the text around the word and why I had made an incorrect prediction. Because the text I'm reading is within a religious context, when I saw "the body of..." I thought "the body of Christ," but my peripheral vision does not see a capital C, it sees a capital J. The word *salvation* is also on the periphery, so I think *The body of Jesus*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, I don't have to read much past the miscued word before realizing *the entire body of Jesus thought not only* does not make much sense. While not a monumental miscue, it does illustrate and even substantiate Goodman's model of the reading process as well as the cause and effect relationship between miscues and the creation of meaning by the reader.

In 1996, Goodman published, *On Reading* which is essentially his thirty plus years of theory and research of reading and miscue analysis wrapped up in one clear, concise and accessible book. Throughout this work he makes a particular nod to linguist Noam Chomsky, whose theories of syntactic structures and Universal Grammar have rattled the cages of behaviorists of the 1950s and 1960s as well as frustrated social linguists who find him unpragmatic. He also comments on the work of M. A. K.

---

<sup>2</sup> Being a Jew who grew up in Iowa, I am familiar with the expression "the body of Christ," but not attached to it in any way that substituting it with "the body of Jesus" sounds unusual to me. Nor is individual salvation a primary concern among most Jews that I have known. I would assume it is safe to say that this is most likely a unique and personal miscue.

Halliday from the social linguistic camp whose theories of Systemic Functional Grammar have been viewed as *the* pragmatic approach to studying linguistics. Along with bridging the chasm of approaches to linguistic studies, what is significant for purposes of this thesis is the specific credit he gives Louise Rosenblatt. Her early theory of reading as a transaction between reader and text was the foundation for what would later become reader response criticism. This transactional notion is a perfect fit for Goodman's reading model:

If writers want to be comprehensible, they must write with a sense of the experience, cognitive schema and beliefs of their target audience, and provide examples and other opportunities for the readers to build meaning on what they already know. I repeat yet again, reading is a transaction. The text has a meaning potential but readers change the text by what they bring to it, and change themselves by adding to or changing what they know as they read. (p. 107)

While he does not paraphrase Rosenblatt until nearly thirty years after his initial work in psycholinguistics, he nonetheless recognizes the connection between the work he had been doing and that being done by at least one prominent literary critic.

### **Frank Smith: Making sense of reading**

Just as some applied linguists have recognized Rosenblatt's work in literary criticism, one psycholinguist whose work has been cited by some reader response critics is Frank Smith. His book, *Understanding Reading* (1971, 1982), echoes many of Goodman's theories, primarily that meaning comes from the background knowledge and experience of readers rather than the text alone. At one point in *On Reading*, Goodman

likens his perspective of reading to the shift of perspective Copernicus brought to science by suggesting that it was the earth that revolved around the sun rather than the sun and all other heavenly bodies revolving around the earth. Nothing about perceptible reality had changed; Copernicus was merely looking at reality differently. Smith too feels that reading needs to be looked at from a different perspective, and his premise, like Goodman's is that "[r]eading is a matter of making sense of written language rather than of decoding print to sound, a theoretical position that has become known as 'psycholinguistic'... [It] is seen as having four distinctive and fundamental characteristics—that is it is *purposeful, selective, anticipatory*, and based on *comprehension*, all matters where the reader must clearly exercise control ... Understanding is the basis not the consequence of reading" (p. 2-3). Here, Smith is using the term *interaction* in much the same way as Goodman. Where Goodman discusses interaction as a negotiation between thought and language, for Smith, "[r]eading always involves a combination of visual and nonvisual information. It is an interaction between a reader and a text" (p. 11). In Goodman's definition, it might be tempting to think that the interaction is happening completely within the reader's mind, and in many ways it is, but one must consider how external language is. Is the text merely the catalyst that stimulates the mind to think about meaning, or is it literally what the mind is forging into meaning? How close is this to the metaphor of trying to separate the dancer from the dance?

In discussing reasons for reading, Smith also cites Rosenblatt who makes a distinction between two different kinds of reading. *Efferent* reading is reading specifically to extract information from a text (i.e. reading labels on medicine bottles to

get the proper dosage or instructions on how to hook up your new DVD player). The other kind is *aesthetic* reading: reading for the experience itself.

Whether the goal of reading is education, enjoyment or both, the reader is always making predictions about what will appear next in the text. As the reader visually takes in text, she processes it into information (see Goodman's models above). Smith defines information as "the reduction of uncertainty," and when uncertainty is reduced, comprehension is the result:

The uncertainty perspective enables us to construct a working definition of comprehension compatible with the definition of information being developed ... If information is regarded as the reduction of uncertainty through the elimination of alternatives, then comprehension can be regarded as a condition where no uncertainty exists. We comprehend when we have no unanswered questions because we have no doubt about alternative interpretations or decisions in our mind. Information enables us to make sense of a situation, and comprehension is that making sense, the resultant absence of uncertainty ... I shall refer to comprehension in reading as a matter of "making sense" of text, of relating written language to what we know already and to what we want to know. (p. 15)

Unlike behaviorists, psycholinguists view this process of reducing uncertainty as an activity that goes beyond a stimulus response relationship, and like Goodman, Smith is adamant that reading is not merely word recognition:

We must get used to the notion that meaning does not depend on specific words ... When we retain a meaningful sequence of words in memory—either short-term or long-term—we are not primarily storing the words at all, but rather the

meaning that we attribute to them. 'Meaning' is the largest and most efficient unit of analysis that we can bring to bear from what we know already to what we are trying to read (or hear) and understand ... Reading involves looking for meaning, not specific words. (p. 50-51)

The role of language to convey meaning leads to the distinction between *surface structure* and *deep structure*. These terms are most often associated with Noam Chomsky's theory of *transformational grammar*. Surface structure refers to the syntactic representation of a sentence while deep structure refers to the more abstract, organization of language that dictates how the surface structure of a linguistic utterance should be interpreted. While Smith does not go into as much technical detail with his use of the terms, his purpose not being to carry out the functions of transformational grammar, he is referring to surface and deep structure in more or less the same context as Chomsky.

According to Smith, surface structure is the part of language that we can physically see or hear: the tangible part. We can distinguish the pitch, volume, and rhythm of spoken language, as we can see the spacing and length, and the punctuation of written language. "All of these observable characteristics of language that exist in the world around us may be called *surface structure* ... On the other hand, there is a part of language that can neither be directly observed nor measured, and that is meaning. In contrast to surface structure, the meaning of language, whether spoken or written, can be referred to as *deep structure*" (p. 70). This may seem simple and obvious enough, but consider the fact that language is not necessarily spoken the way it is written. For example, where written text shows *going to*, when spoken, we often hear *gonna*, or what is written as, *What are you up to?* might be heard as, *Whachya up to?* Such discrepancies



between written and spoken language are an ongoing frustration for second language learners, especially with textbooks that present the most sterile grammatical forms of the language. Add to this the fact that so many words have multiple meanings, and the ability to grasp the deep structure of any given phrase goes far beyond a knowledge and understanding of the grammatical and syntactic rules of a language. When is a word a noun? When is it a verb? *Fire the torpedoes!* Vs. *Fire in the hole!* How easy is it to distinguish the specific meaning of the single preposition, *on* in the sentence, *On my birthday I got a book on the life of Eleanor Roosevelt, but I left it on the bus that stops on 4th and Main?* It is not the words themselves, presented in any given order (whether written or spoken) that give them meaning, but rather it is the meaning we give to the words that dictates their placement and use within the context of the text. "In other words ... there is only one way in which language can be understood, that print can be comprehended, and that is by having meaning brought to it" (p. 75).

The overall gist of what Smith says is that the reader must bring meaning to the text. Like Goodman, he points to the importance of making predictions of the content of text based on its context. Within any text there is a level of redundancy due to context that assists in the reader's ability to make accurate predictions. Smith calls comprehension "meaning identification," the end result of which is the reduction of uncertainty of the text. "What is different about comprehension is that readers bring to the text implicit questions about meaning rather than about letters or words. The term meaning identification also helps to emphasize that comprehension is an active process ... comprehension can be regarded as *the reduction of the reader's uncertainty*" (p. 155).

Finally, Smith does discuss the *interaction* between reader and text, which despite Rosenblatt's objection to assimilating the term *interaction* with *transaction*, smacks of an identical notion. "Readers must bring meaning to texts. But obviously writers make a contribution too. And there must be a point at which readers and writers interact. That point is the text" (p. 167). Similar to claims that Rosenblatt makes, the text, despite its being written by the writer, and read by the reader, has an independent existence all its own, and it is only through an interaction that a meaning can be derived. The meaning that is created is however, helped along by certain specifications that the writer brings to the writing and the reader brings to the reading, which is related to the redundancies the writer puts into the text and the predictions the reader makes about the text:

Texts exist independently of writers and readers. At no time does the text in its entirety exist in either the writer's or the reader's head. But before the interaction with the text (the writing or the reading), the specification determines what the writer or reader will do as it changes the specification and contributes to what they finish up believing they have done. (p. 173)

Smith might be one to paraphrase the old adage, "if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" into, "if a book sits on the shelf and there is no one there to read it, does it have any meaning?"

### **David Rumelhart: Interaction and schemata**

Yet a third psycholinguist, whose writing in the psychology community was instrumental in establishing what would eventually be termed *interactive reading* in applied linguistics, is David Rumelhart. In 1977, Rumelhart introduced his model of the

interactive reading process, interaction being the ongoing, simultaneous negotiation of hypotheses between bottom-up and top-down processing. Like Goodman and Smith, Rumelhart seeks to replace strictly linear bottom-up models of reading, which cannot accurately account for frequently observable and documented examples of top-down reading strategies. Specifically, he refers to the Gough model (1972) that is essentially a flowchart that maps out the reading process from graphic input to semantic understanding, and the LaBerge-Samuels model (1974), which does essentially the same thing only it presents the process as a schematic rather than a flowchart. Each model moves exclusively in a one-way direction. "The LaBerge-Samuels model, like the Gough model, is a strictly bottom-up process. Although there are alternative routes, the basic sequence is from features to letters, to spelling patterns, to visual word representations to phonological word representations to word meanings to word group meanings" (p. 578).

Rumelhart draws on the problematic results of several studies, which indicate that readers are often not deciphering text in accordance with such models. From these examples he comes to a number of conclusions indicating that there is a good amount of top-down processing going on. First is the conclusion that the perception of letters often depends on the surrounding letters. In other words, it is often easier to recognize and remember sequences of letters if they are part of familiar words rather than just randomly thrown together.

Secondly, our perception of words depends on the syntactic environment in which we encounter the words:

Perhaps the best evidence for syntactic effects on the level of word perception comes from an analysis of oral reading errors. The most common error in oral

reading is the substitution error—when an incorrect word is simply substituted for the correct one. If syntax had no effect on the perception of words, we would expect that reading errors should be determined by visual similarity and not by part of speech. However, there is a strong tendency for a reading error to be of the same part of speech as the word for which it was substituted. (p. 582)

So prepositions are incorrectly substituted for prepositions, verbs for verbs, and nouns for nouns. It would be more likely to substitute the word *beside* for the preposition *below*, rather than substituting the word *bellow*, which can be either a verb or a noun.

Thirdly, our perception of words depends on the semantic environment in which we encounter the words. It is much easier to recognize and remember words if they are surrounded by related words. Therefore, a word like *pencil* will be much easier to recognize if it is with a group of words such as *pen*, *paper*, and *write*, than if it is with unrelated words like *lettuce*, *bathrobe*, and *accordion*.

Fourthly, our perception of syntax depends on the semantic context in which the string appears. As an example, Rumelhart asks us to consider the following sentences:

- a. They are eating apples.
- b. The children are eating apples.
- c. The juicy red ones are eating apples.

Because of our semantic knowledge, sentence (a) is the only one that carries ambiguity because the pronoun *they* could refer to whoever is eating the apples or the apples themselves. And our understanding of what *they* refers to will determine whether or not we read *eating* as a verb or adjective. In sentence (b) it is clearly understood that *eating* is a verb because we understand that in our everyday world, children are not apples, and

in sentence (c) it is clearly understood that *eating* is an adjective because we don't generally refer to people as juicy red ones. Now consider these sentences:

- d. I saw the Grand Canyon flying to New York.
- e. I saw the Grand Canyon *while I was* flying to New York.
- f. I saw the Grand Canyon *which was* flying to New York.

Because of our semantic understanding, we interpret sentence (d) to mean the same as sentence (e), but in the these sentences:

- g. I saw the cattle grazing in the field.
- h. I saw the cattle *while I was* grazing in the field.
- i. I saw the cattle *that were* grazing in the field. (p. 585-6)

we take sentence (g) to mean the same as sentence (i), even though syntactically, (d) matches (g), (e) matches (h), and (f) matches (i).

Finally, our interpretation of the meaning of what we read depends on the general context in which we encounter the text. To make this point, Rumelhart uses the following example:

- a. The statistician would be certain that the difference was significant *since all of the figures on the right hand side of the table were larger than any of those on the left.*
- b. The craftsman was certainly justified in charging more for the carvings on the right *since all of the figures on the right hand side of the table were larger than any of those on the left.* (p. 586)

Where the endings of these sentences are identical, the meanings are completely different because of the different contexts framed at the beginning of each sentence. We know the figures that relate to the statistician are numbers, and the table is made up of columns and rows either on paper or a computer screen where the numbers are arranged.

Likewise, we know that the figures relating to the craftsman are statues, and the table is a piece of furniture upon which the statues are displayed.

The bottom line to all these examples is to illustrate that not only do readers occasionally arrive at textual meaning via top-down processing, but that this happens with more frequency than bottom-up processing:

The dependence of meaning on context would appear to be the norm rather than the exception in reading.

To summarize, these results taken together appear to support the view that our apprehension of information at one level of analysis can often depend on our apprehension of information at a higher level. How can this be? ... The answer, I suspect, comes by presuming that all of these knowledge sources apply simultaneously and that our perceptions are the product of the simultaneous interaction among all of them. (p. 587-8)

At this point, reading is no longer seen as an either/or scenario between bottom-up and top-down processing, but an interaction between the two. While top-down processing may predominate the decoding of meaning, it in no way negates the role that bottom-up processing plays in decoding text for meaning.

Rumelhart's theory of interaction was further advanced in his article, "Schemata: The Building Blocks of Cognition" (1980). The whole notion of what schemata (plural of schema) actually are is an abstract notion, and unlike his previous reading model, he explains them through analogies rather than mathematical equations. Tracing the term back to its Kantian origin, Rumelhart states that "schemata truly are *the building blocks of*

*cognition*. They are the fundamental elements upon which all information processing depends" (p. 33). Schema theory is:

basically a theory about knowledge ... all knowledge is packaged into units.

These units are the schemata. Embedded in these packets of knowledge is, in addition to the knowledge itself, information about how this knowledge is to be used.

A schema, then, is a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory ... A schema theory embodies a *prototype* theory of meaning. That is, inasmuch as a schema underlying a concept stored in memory corresponds to the *meaning* of that concept, meanings are encoded in terms of the typical or normal situations or events that instantiate that concept. (p. 34).

As convoluted as the last part of this definition might seem, it may be easier to think of schemata as a series of metafunctions operating on several levels, and all interconnected.

One analogy Rumelhart makes is that schemata are like plays, or play scripts.

Where the playwright creates a script containing all the essential elements of the play, no matter how detailed that script is, the final results will depend on the combined efforts of the individuals involved in putting on the production. There is always room for individual interpretation and improvisation based on the director, the actors, the location of the play and basically whatever else has rendered the theater community capable of producing a new version of *Hamlet* every three years or so. The example Rumelhart uses is the script of BUYING. We understand that in this act there is usually a SELLER, a PURCHASER, the MERCHANDISE to be sold, and MONEY to make the transaction. Practically limitless combinations can be created within this framework that would fit

into the schema we think of as the act of BUYING. In addition, all of the variables that make up the schema known as BUYING are in themselves subschema. Within the schema of MONEY, there are several variables that would fit, and likewise for a SELLER, PURCHASER and MERCHANDISE. There are of course constraints on which variables fit into a given schema, and Rumelhart sees this as serving two functions. The first is that "variable constraints help in the identification of the various aspects of the situation with the variables of the schema" (p. 35-6), and the second is "that variable constraints offer default values for unobserved variables *conditional on the values of the observed variables*" (p. 36). The recognition of variables within a text triggers a reader's knowledge of a schema in which the text would fit, and at the same time allows her to make predictions about the text based on her knowledge of other schemata.

It is important to keep in mind that a lot of space is allowed within the constraints of any given set of variables, and this fits very well into models of reader response criticism as it will be discussed later. "A schema is not so rigidly applied that no variation is allowed. The schema only provides the skeleton around which the situation is interpreted" (p. 37). Different readers reading a description of a rural Midwestern landscape are going to create individual and unique images of the trees, ponds, clouds, cattle in the pastures, silos and crumbling barns. The amount of wiggle room might depend on the level of detail of the description, but no two readers will create the exact same image in their minds.

Another analogy Rumelhart uses is that schemata are in themselves like theories. Basically, we use all the knowledge we possess to interpret our understanding of reality.



At the same time, the observations we make go into providing evidence that helps establish theories:

Just as the determination that a particular theory accounts for some observed results involves the determination of the *parameters of the theory*, so the determination that a particular configuration of schemata accounts for the data presently available at our senses requires the determination of the values of the *variables of the schemata* ... Readers are said to have understood the text when they are able to find a configuration of hypotheses (schemata) that offers a coherent account for the various aspects of the text. (p. 38)

Again this comes suspiciously close to notions of literary criticism that see interpretation as an active process on the part of the reader. Eventually, when theories withstand the test affirming interpretations of what we observe, they then become useful in helping us make predictions. Thus, we can speculate and form hypotheses about reality without necessarily needing to observe it firsthand. "This allows our interpretations to far outstrip our sensory observations. In fact, once we have determined that a particular schema accounts for some event, we may not be able to determine which aspects of our beliefs are based on direct sensory information and which are merely consequences of our interpretation" (p. 38). In a sense, Rumelhart is touching on the Derridian notion that language/text has primacy over everything else, that language itself determines perceptions of reality.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> "The passage beyond language requires language or rather a text as a place for the trace of a step that is not (present) elsewhere. That is why the movement of that trace, passing beyond language, is not classical nor does it render the *logos* either secondary or instrumental. *Logos* remains as an indispensable as the fold folded onto the gift, just like the tongue (*langue*) of my mouth when I tear bread from it to give it to the other. It is also my body" (Derrida, 1991, p. 416).

A third analogy is that schemata are like procedures. "Schemata are active computational devices capable of evaluating the quality of their own fit to the available data. That is, a schema should be viewed as a procedure whose function it is to determine whether, and to what degree, it accounts for the pattern of observations ... Thus, to the degree that schemata underlying concepts are identified with *meaning of those concepts*, a schema theory is *both a prototype theory and a procedural theory of meaning*" (p. 39). It uses itself and however much of its multiple subschemata necessary to evaluate and qualify itself. In interpreting the text, it defines and establishes itself as well as whatever subschemata substantiate it, more or less kind of killing two birds with one stone. This comes close to one theme that encompasses much of both linguistic and literary theory: the notion of reflexive self-referentiality and the intertextuality of texts that is a significant theme of postmodern literary criticism.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE READER TAKES THE STAGE: FROM THE OBJECTIVE TEXT TO THE READER'S RESPONSE**

Just as the theorists of interactive reading models emphasize that a reader's background knowledge of the grammatical, lexical and semantic features of language are crucial in her ability to decipher texts, reader response critics stress that her social and cultural background knowledge is vital in the interpretation of literature. Another parallel is the traditions from which both these theories developed. As the psycholinguists reviewed above were moving away from behavioral linguistic models that portray the reader as passively responding to textual stimulus, reader response critics were establishing the reader as an active participant in the creation of meaning with the text. This was a dramatic shift from the objective view taken by proponents of New Criticism who believed that meaning was contained completely within the text itself, and it was the job of the well-trained reader to extract it.

In Chapter Two I reviewed the shift from the behavioral linguistics of Bloomfield and Skinner to the psycholinguistic theories of Goodman, Smith, and Rumelhart. In Chapter Three, I will review some of the prominent works in New Criticism, as well as works that would establish the theory of reader response criticism. In between the review of these two theoretical developments, there will be a relatively longer review of the work of Louise Rosenblatt, whose transactional theory of reading developed during the New Criticism period and set the stage for reader response.

## **New Criticism: The poem stands alone**

With the development of linguistics as a science in the first half of the twentieth century, the field of literary criticism followed suit in attempts to interpret texts as scientifically and objectively as possible. Despite the advent of subjectivist perspectives in the postmodern age, New Criticism still stands as the most influential movement in literary criticism of the twentieth century. Even when considering concepts of Derridian deconstruction, I have always understood that the intentions on the part of postmodernists were never to throw out the baby with the bathwater as far as the merits of New Criticism were concerned. For the New Critics, the prior problems with methods of literary interpretation revolved around the emphasis on the historical background of a poem's author as well as the historical context in which the poem was written. With the goal of approaching a poem as objectively as possible, it becomes necessary to consider it as a self-contained entity that must be studied in isolation from all the factors which went into its creation, with specific focus on how form and the content effect each other.

Attachments such as authorial, historical, cultural and social context are viewed as extraneous and ancillary, creating as much a hindrance as an insight into determining the true essence and meaning of a poem.

New Criticism views a literary text as the residue of the creative process of the author; the act of creating meaning has already been completed. Whether the finished product is merely a reflection of some internal aspect of the author, or representative of the creator's surrounding environment in which it was constructed, what the work

“means” already exists complete and intact. It is then merely the task of the reader/critic/observer to extract that meaning much like a detective will piece together clues to reveal the culprit of a crime. It is a process of reconstructing past events into an interpretation that illustrates, beyond reasonable doubt, what is actually happening within the confines of the text on the page. The creativity on the part of the reader is more or less relegated to her skill as a detective and her ability to find the “correct” or “most accurate” interpretation that can be deduced from the available evidence, all of which exists solely in the text itself.

#### **I.A. Richards: Emotion as the means to interpretation**

One of the earliest voices of the New Critics was that of I.A. Richards, who established some of New Criticism's fundamental concepts in his 1928 book, *Principles of Literary Criticism*. He felt that too often, the language we use to interpret art is not really referring to the object being described. Instead we transpose concepts and terms that only exist in the mind, and place them onto the object:

Such terms as ‘construction’, ‘form’, ‘balance’, ‘composition’, ‘design’, ‘unity’, ‘expression’, for all the arts; as ‘depth’, ‘movement’, ‘texture’, ‘solidity’, in the criticism of painting; as ‘rhythm’, ‘stress’, ‘plot’, ‘character’, in literary criticism; as ‘harmony’, ‘atmosphere’, ‘development’, in music, are instances. All these terms are currently used as though they stood for qualities inherent in things outside the mind, as a painting, in the sense of an assemblage of pigments, is undoubtedly outside the mind. Even the difficulty of discovering, in the case of

poetry, what thing other than print and paper is there for these alleged qualities to belong to, has not checked the tendency. (p. 21)

Much like Bloomfield's *mechanist* vs. *mentalist* model, Richards develops his own model of explaining the contrary methods of interpretation where he stresses the importance of distinguishing between *critical* and *technical* forms of description. "All remarks as to the ways and means by which experiences arise or are brought about are technical, but critical remarks are about the values of experiences and the reasons for regarding them as valuable, or not valuable. We shall endeavour in what follows to show that critical remarks are merely a branch of psychological remarks, and that no special ethical or metaphysical ideas need be introduced to explain value" (p. 23). The problem Richards sees with most "critical remarks" is that more often than not emotions and feelings are considered to be something more than linguistic forms of response. To him, emotions and feelings are essentially the same as other referents, other signs and symbols that we consider aspects of language. Expressions of emotions and feelings are merely ways of communicating; no more or less sophisticated than the language we create to describe them:

But feeling is sometimes a more subtle way of referring, more dangerous also, because more difficult to corroborate and to control, and more liable to confusion. There is no inherent superiority, however, in feeling as opposed to thought, there is merely a difference in applicability; nor is there any opposition or clash between them except for those who are mistaken either in their thinking or in their feeling, or in both. (p. 131-2)

The idea of considering feelings and emotions to be simply other forms of referents might seem like a stretch, but this perspective can make it much easier for multiple readers to objectively approach the same poem, or at least agree that there is an objective, primary interpretation. On the one hand, Richards understands and accepts that the unique experiences of each reader are instrumental in the interpretation of a poem. On the other hand, he insists that the readers who are aware that the feelings and emotions are merely symbols and signs will be better able to negotiate with other like-minded readers the correct interpretation of a poem:

This, although it may seem odd and complicated, is by far the most convenient, in fact it is the only workable way of defining a poem; namely, as a class of experiences which do not differ in any character more than a certain amount, varying for each character, from a standard experience. (p. 226-7)

The language John Crowe Ransom uses in his review of I. A. Richards in *New Criticism* (1941) alludes to the behaviorist elements in his theories. "To Richards the object known in a poem—whether its status be that of a real or of an illusory object—is preferably a mere stimulus that produces first a set of emotion, and presently a set of attitudes" (p. 15). What Richards is essentially getting at is a shift of perspective; emotion must be seen as a means of interpreting the poem rather than the end result of reading the poem. To do otherwise is to mistake emotion and feeling for meaning. Despite the fact that the meaning of a poem is being negotiated among readers, he sees the poem as acting on readers; there is no acknowledgement of negotiation between readers and texts. Regardless of the skill and ability of the reader to interpret a poem, she is still in a stimulus/response relationship with the text.

### **Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren: The poem stands for itself ...**

Another integral text in the formulation of New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938). In the book's opening letter, they emphasize that the poem should be the ultimate object of study whereas too often it has been the paraphrasing of narrative content, the study of biographical and historical materials, and inspirational and didactic interpretation:

Of course, paraphrase may be necessary as a preliminary step in the reading of a poem, and a study of the biographical and historical background may do much to clarify interpretation; but these things should be considered as means and not as ends. And though one may consider a poem as an instance of historical or ethical documentation, the poem in itself, if literature is to be studied as literature, remains finally the object for study. Moreover, even if the interest is in the poem as a historical or ethical document, there is a prior consideration: one must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document. (iv)

What they see as some of the prime misconceptions of literary interpretation is that reading poetry is approached as "message hunting," attempting to accomplish an act of "pure realization" or the revelation of a "beautiful statement of some high truth." In essence, what occurs when applying this perspective to reading poetry is, as stated above, that the poem becomes a means to some other end. What we as readers end up looking for is a meaning outside of the poem to which the poem refers, so what happens is that the poem becomes a referent (perhaps even a metareferent) that points to an object



outside itself. Brooks and Penn Warren are concerned that the poem must remain the object of study and that interpreted meanings point to the poem alone:

The question, then about any element in a poem is not whether it is in itself pleasing, or agreeable, or valuable, or 'poetical,' but whether it works with the other elements to create the effect intended by the poet. The relationship the grammatical and semantic elements have on each other within a poem is of primary importance, and it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we should compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall [which is made up of individual bricks cemented together] but to something organic like a plant. (p. 18-9)

Thus, a leaf should not be considered via its relationship to the botanist who cultivates it or the garden in which it is planted. Instead one must examine how its individual parts are intertwined. In other words, how do the roots contribute to the structure of the stem, and how does it in turn support the significance of the blossom, and how do the connections and relationships between these individual parts construct the meaning of the flower as a whole? The personal history and motivation of the gardener should not be the focus of the study of the flower. The study of the flower alone must be where observation begins and ends. The poet's life and motivation should not be the purpose of analyzing a poem. The poem stands for itself and analysis should not go beyond the rhythm, meter, metaphor, tone and all the other elements that exist wholly within the poem and hold it together.

### **René Wellek and Austin Warren: ... and the reader must step aside**

In *Theory of Literature* (1942), René Wellek and Austin Warren also pursue the theme of a poetic work existing autonomously. They feel that a poem should be studied objectively as its own complete entity, shunning the notion that the meaning of a piece of literature can be obtained by considering the intent of its author:

The meaning of a work of art is not exhausted by, or even equivalent to, its intention. As a system of values, it leads an independent life. The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for the author and his contemporaries. It is rather the result of a process of accretion, i.e., the history of its criticism by its many readers in many ages ... We must be able to refer a work of art to the values of its own time and of all the periods subsequent to its own. A work of art is both "eternal" (i.e., preserves a certain identity) and "historical" (i.e., passes through a process of traceable development). (p. 31-2)

While it is necessary to consider how the text functions in relation to the various points in history in which it exists, in order to do so, it must always be seen as an object complete and intact aside from any impact on the part of the author or the reader. This is an optimistic perspective in the sense that the work is not merely a fossilized relic, only having relevance to its own time and place of creation, as the opening quote from Thoreau suggests, but it also maintains a certain level of immortality. Of course it can only be brought to life in the mind of the reader, but this is not the primary concern of the New Critics.

Throughout this text, Wellek and Warren confirm what they see as the “new” approach to criticism. “The natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves. After all, only the works themselves justify all our interest in the life of an author, in his social environment and the whole process of literature ... In recent years a healthy reaction has taken place which recognizes that the study of literature should, first and foremost, concentrate on the actual works of art themselves” (p. 127-8). From this comes the insistence that the focus of a literary work should be on the relationship between the content and form of the text, culminating in the structure of the work and echoing Brooks and Penn Warren’s plant analogy. “‘Structure’ is a concept including both content and form so far as they are organized for aesthetic purposes. The work of art is, then, considered as a whole system of signs, or structure of signs, serving a specific aesthetic purpose” (p. 129). This in and of itself is not such a problematic approach to interpreting text except that they flat-out reject the interpretive role of the reader as well as the impact the text and reader have on each other. “The psychology of the reader, however interesting in itself or useful for pedagogical purposes, will always remain outside the object of literary study—the concrete work of art—and is unable to deal with the question of the structure and value of the work of art” (p. 135). This is not to say that the individual interpretation of each reader has no merit on what will become the accepted “meaning” of a text, but Wellek and Warren’s focus is on structure. What they term “Perspectivism” insists that the conclusions drawn by one reader must blend in with those of other readers and all be guided by a collectively established mode of interpretation:

All the different points of view are by no means equally right. It will always be possible to determining which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply. A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms, is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation. All relativism is ultimately defeated by the recognition that "the Absolute is in the relative, though not finally and fully in it."

The work of art, then, appears as an object of knowledge *sui generis* which has a special ontological status. It is neither real (like a statue) nor mental (like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle). It is a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in collective ideology, changing with it, accessible only through individual mental experiences, based on the sound-structure of its sentences ... "Perspectivism," as we have termed such a conception, does not mean an anarchy of values, a glorification of individual caprice, but a process of getting to know the object from different points of view which may be defined and criticized in their turn. Structure, sign, and value form these aspects of the very same problem and cannot be artificially isolated. (p. 144-5)

While it is allowed that all readers must explore for themselves the text and work through cognitive processes of interpretations based on personal experiences, there is nonetheless the assumption that interpretations ultimately must reach conclusions equivalent to those best suited to make sense of the established structures of poetic writing.

Even in the wake of postmodern criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century, much about New Criticism is still relevant to interpreting literary texts. From a

pedagogical standpoint, getting younger students to consider that works exist separate from and not necessarily related to their own lives is often a daunting task. While they rely on their personal experience to interpret a text and the text they are reading may very well relate closely to their own lives, this is different from inserting themselves into the interpretation. Often I have had to remind college freshmen in the margins of their papers that "This is not about you; stick to the text." I do this in an attempt to keep them focused on the interpretation at hand rather than lapsing into a narrative about how "When Huck and Tom run away it reminds me of the time I was fifteen and me and my friend stole my uncle's car and went down to Florida for spring break and then we got a flat and then ..." and so on. At the same time, to insist that there exists a rigid hierarchy where only the interpretations of the most experienced and trained readers achieve the highest credibility necessarily dictates that those at the top of the hierarchy will make the decisions which interpretations are valid. What does this do for egalitarianism in the classroom? It is likely no accident that the move away from the objectivity of New Criticism toward subjective postmodern approaches came about in the midst of other cultural and societal shifts in the 1960s and 1970s such as the civil rights and feminist movements. This also leads me to wonder how much of an accident it is that although the most important figure in the development of reader response criticism was developing her theories during the height of New Criticism, her concepts would not gather strength for more than twenty years. And even after the flurry of reader response writing began to fade in the early 1990s, Louise Rosenblatt has yet to receive the recognition from the like-minded writers whom she preceded.

## **Louise Rosenblatt: Exploring the reader's voice**

In 1938, when the New Critics were gathering momentum, Rosenblatt first published *Literature as Exploration*, and after some sixty-odd years and four updated editions, it is still a *tour de force* in literary criticism, especially from a pedagogical standpoint. The timeliness of the revised editions is no doubt crucial to the work's continued relevance. In the 1995 edition, Rosenblatt addresses many concepts and notes many shifts in literary movements that have taken place throughout the past six decades since the book's initial publication, much of which she has commented on in some of her other writings. In this work, she lays out the premise for what would become reader response criticism some three decades later. If not the outright "inventor" of the theory, she must be considered the undisputed godmother of subjective interpretation in literary criticism. Where New Criticism had shifted emphasis from using the text to discover the author's intentions (what does the writer mean?) to isolating the text in order to extract its purest meaning (what does this poem mean?), Rosenblatt shifts attention to the reader's personal relationship with the text. It is from this relationship that meaning, ultimately the poem itself, is created:

A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. Out of this complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience. When the reader refers to a poem, say "Byzantium," he is designating such an experience in relation to a text. (p. 24)

Possibly her greatest departure from the New Critics, considering the time in which she is writing, is her perspective on how students should be taught to approach the form and content of a poem. Where form and content were the be-all and end-all of interpretation for New Critics, Rosenblatt feels focusing on these concepts can only be useful for students as far as they possess an understanding of their own experiential relationship to the text. Studying form and content for their own sake does not produce an understanding of the poem:

Of course students need to understand the nature of the diverse literary forms—the lyric, the epic, the novel, the essay, the drama—forms that our literary ancestors and contemporaries have developed through the cyclic process of “convention and revolt.” We want to share with our students the pleasure to be derived from a discriminating response to the means that the author has employed and variations or reversals he has based on the traditional pattern ... Awareness of the function of various characters or episodes or images illuminates what the work as a whole “means.” However, that perception of order or pattern is important to the average reader only in relation to the impact of the work as a whole. And these sensitivities to the author’s technique are not necessarily best fostered or manifested through a labeling of devices or an analysis of forms. (p. 47-8)

As important as it is for students to be educated in conventions and canons of literature and literary interpretation, Rosenblatt also feels it is important that readers come to a text with experiences and background knowledge that will enable them to better grasp the world the author is trying to convey. It is necessary for the reader to have a certain amount of social grounding akin to that of an author. “To share the author’s insight, the

reader need not have had identical experiences, but he must have experienced some needs, emotions, concepts, some circumstances and relationships, from which he can construct the new situations, emotions, and understandings set forth in the literary work” (p. 77). This concept foreshadows the psycholinguistic theories that would lead to the development of interactive reading models of second language acquisition as discussed above regarding the relationship between bottom-up and top-down processing. And not unlike the New Critics, Rosenblatt is also concerned that students of literature have at least an understanding of science if not an ability to approach interpretation scientifically. “An understanding of the spirit of scientific method and its application to human affairs is the most fundamental social concept that the teacher of literature should possess. A lively sense of the essential nature of scientific method will compensate for lack of detailed knowledge of the social sciences” (p. 128). *Literature as Exploration* is certainly Rosenblatt’s best known and most influential work, and throughout five updated editions it has continued to keep abreast of the evolution and shift away from objective to subjective models of textual interpretation, and has almost taken on the guise of a sixty-year work in progress.

In 1978 she published *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, and it is in this work that she establishes her “transactional” model of reading, striking a balance among all the entities involved in the act of reading and “admits into the limelight the whole scene—author, text, and reader. We shall be especially concerned with the member of the cast who has hitherto been neglected—the reader” (p. 5). It is important to understand that she is not necessarily overturning hierarchies by placing the reader above the text, but rather is empowering the reader by giving her shared responsibility with the



text to create a meaning. She credits the term "transactional" to work developed by John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley (1949). For Rosenblatt, "'Transaction' designates, then, an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (p. 17). For me, this gets at the heart of both reader response criticism and interactive reading models and is the key to the relationship between the two theories. Essentially, the text does not have authority over the reader or vice versa. It is the ongoing process between the text and the reader, the interplay between the referent syntactical structures of the text with the experiences, past and ongoing, that are conjured in the reader's mind by the text, and synthesized into a relevant and defensible interpretation.

While up to this point I have been referring to all texts as having a more or less equal relationship with any given reader, for the purposes of literary interpretation, Rosenblatt makes a clear distinction between "text" and "poem":

"Text" designates a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols ... in a reading situation "the text" may be thought of as the printed signs in their capacity to serve as symbols. "Poem" presupposes a reader actively involved with a text and refers to what he makes of his responses to the particular set of verbal symbols. "Poem" stands here for the whole category, "literary work of art," and for terms such as "novel," "play," or "short story" ... I shall use the term "poem" to refer to the whole category of aesthetic transactions between readers and texts without implying the greater or lesser "poeticity" of any specific genre.

The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text (p. 12).

This distinction of what is and is not a poem develops into what Rosenblatt terms the difference between "efferent" and "aesthetic" reading. "To designate this type of reading, in which the primary concern of the reader is what he will carry away from the reading, I have chosen the term 'efferent,' derived from the Latin, 'efferre,' 'to carry away'" (p. 24). Her example is of a mother reading the directions on a label in order to determine what to do after her child has just swallowed poison. The meaning of the text is only important in that it gives information as to action that should be taken outside of and apart from the text itself. The reader is not concerned with the subtleties of rhythm, vocabulary or other literary elements of the text. "In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event ... [the reader] pays attention to the association, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him ... *In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text*" (p. 24-5). Obviously, this covers a lot of ground, and Rosenblatt does much throughout her discussion to emphasize that there is a huge range of efferent and aesthetic levels of reading between either extreme. Within this range, the reader must always be making choices between what to take from the text, what to bring to the text, how the text applies to the reader's situation and vice versa.

Along with decisions the reader makes, the nature of the text also plays a role as to how efferently or aesthetically the reading is. "Actually, no hard-and-fast line

separates efferent—scientific or expository—reading on the one hand from aesthetic reading on the other. It is more accurate to think of a continuum, a series of gradations between the nonaesthetic and the aesthetic extremes" (p. 35). I would agree that there is a middle ground in which these two purposes enmesh, a realm with which academics in particular are quite familiar. Reading is a primary process when doing research, but most scholars also do research because they enjoy it. This thesis itself came about because I found myself enjoying the assigned articles in my composition proseminar that dealt with poststructural pedagogical theories. Reading newspapers, news magazines or any other text dealing with hobbies such as carpentry, gardening, stamp, antique or guitar collecting, all straddle the fence between efferent and aesthetic reading.

One crucial theme Rosenblatt touches on is the similarity that reading has to performance, and she illustrates this by using music as an analogy. When a musician plays a composer's score (a musical text), there is a level of personal interpretation involved. The musician's level of talent and ability and understanding of the score will all play a part in determining how it will be translated into aural music. The same happens when an actor takes on a role in a play. "We speak of Barrymore's Hamlet, Gielgud's Hamlet, Nicholson's Hamlet" (p. 13). This is especially true in Jazz and Blues, two genres defined by the musician's ability to improvise.<sup>4</sup> Though Rosenblatt does not

---

<sup>4</sup> In my own CD collection I have no fewer than four different versions each of several standard pieces such as Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood," Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight," George Gershwin's "Summertime," or John Lewis's "Django." Every rendition is a distinct and personal interpretation of the composition where the individual artist's personality is as much if not more the attraction to the piece as the actual composition itself. While one can listen to John Coltrane's rendition of "In a Sentimental Mood" and recognize the tune as an Ellington composition, the tone and phrasing of Coltrane's saxophone is completely distinguishable from Stanley Turrentine playing the same composition on the same instrument.

come right out and say it, one can assume that if the "poem" is actually an event in time created between the text and the reader, then the reader, as much as the author, can be labeled a poet. "The reader of a text who evokes a literary work of art is, above all, a performer, in the same sense that a pianist performs a sonata, reading it from the text before him" (p. 28). Again, such a notion evokes a sense of empowerment among readers, and this can be a very important lesson for the classroom.

Throughout her discussion of the poem as event, Rosenblatt emphasizes the importance of recognizing that the reader's personality, memory of past experience, and context of situation all play a major role in how a text will be interpreted. "The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader" (p. 20). The interpretation of a text does not happen in a vacuum. This perspective not only empowers the reader, but empowers the text as well. "Just as a knowing is the process linking knower and a known, so a poem should not be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" (p. 20-1). In the same way that any reader is a fluid, changing being, so too is the text. If a reader comes away from the reading of a text changed, then so must the text change due to its own position in space and time based on its relationship to readers in varying spaces and times. Certainly, words change meaning due to cultural, historical, and situational factors, and this notion approaches the undecidability of language that is so much a part of deconstructive thought. Rosenblatt sees this as distinguishing between the openness and constraint of the text. "The notion

that at least the literal or referential meanings of the words remain constant offers little support, not only because of the fluidity of language but mainly because to consider the literal apart from the total import of a word is to destroy it as an aesthetic entity" (p. 76). If the meaning of a literary text is stagnant, the risk is run of stagnating language itself.

When considering the elements involved in evoking a poem, Rosenblatt takes the position that literary creation is ultimately the process of making choices. Even language on a purely functional, efferent level has individual and personal significance for any given reader. Essentially, there is no part of a text that cannot potentially elicit a multitude of possible responses depending on what a reader brings to it:

In broadest terms, the basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues; the adoption of an efferent or aesthetic stance; the development of a tentative framework or guiding principle of organization; the arousal of expectations that influence the selection and synthesis of further responses; the fulfillment or reinforcement of expectations, or their frustration, sometimes leading to revision of the framework, and sometimes, if necessary, to rereading; the arousal of further expectations; until, if all goes well, with the completed decoding of the text, the final synthesis or organization is achieved. (p. 54)

Far too much is happening to assume that the reader is merely *tabula rasa*, waiting for the meaning of the text to simply soak into the brain. In the quest for "the poem itself," Rosenblatt warns against searching for the true ultimate meaning because there simply is no such thing:

To seekers after absolute standards, this represents a frighteningly relativistic view of the literary situation. Yet there is no need to fear the "anarchy and chaos"

of *de gustibus non disputandum*. The concept of adequacy of reading (or interpretation) is not rejected when we recognize that there may be diverse or alternative sets of criteria of adequacy. Nothing prevents our evaluating the adequacy of any particular reading of a particular text: Clarification or *specification of the criteria being applied is needed to obviate confusion*. Such evaluation becomes easier, of course, when various interpretations are involved. If what one reader has made of a text is being compared with another's reading of it, the standards of adequacy by which they are being compared can be and should be made explicit. (p. 124)

Rather than assume there is a "true" or "correct" interpretation, let various interpretations validate or invalidate each other. This is far from the misconception of "anything goes" that many critics against poststructuralism have. Not having a single, correct and valid meaning does not mean all interpretations are equally correct and valid, and here is where Rosenblatt exposes some of the fears of elitism in much of New Criticism. "Recent critical and literary theory is replete with references to 'the informed reader,' 'the competent reader,' 'the ideal reader.' All suggest a certain distinction from, if not downright condescension toward, the ordinary reader" (p. 138). Even if one reader is conscious of other readers and their interpretations of texts, this should not interfere with the reading experience itself. "The reader's primary goal as he meets the text is to have as full an aesthetic experience as possible, given his own capacities and the sensibilities, preoccupations and memories he brings to the transaction" (p. 132). "No one else, no matter how much more competent, more informed, nearer the ideal (whatever that might be), can read (perform) the poem or the story or the play for us" (p. 141). "Moreover, do

not critics and literary scholars tend to represent a rather narrow spectrum of response? Readers may bring to the text experiences, awareness, and needs that have been ignored in traditional criticism ... The aim should be to widen the range of critical voices—not to reject the contributions of the professional students of literature but to strengthen the affinities between them and ordinary readers" (p. 143). This plethora of quotes re-emphasizes my comment about what is at stake when those at the top of academic hierarchies have the last word on what a text means. Not only do established scholars take a stand of elitism which restricts potential meanings of texts and the creativity and value of readers holding lesser status, but it also deprives the latter of a "good read," and this is detrimental to both the study of language in the classroom as well as students' overall appreciation for reading.

### **Reader response theory: The merging of the reader and the text**

In this section I will review some of the predominant themes that come up in the work of various theorists of reader response criticism. A discussion of the shift in literary criticism from objective, scientific perspectives to more subjective models of textual interpretation will lead into a commentary on the reflexive nature of defining the meaning of language, which will progress into a section on intertextuality. Here I will give an example of two different readers' responses to L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. Finally, I will discuss the misconception many critics have of postmodern theories that subjective models of reading allow for any and every reader's interpretation of a text.

### **Interpreting reality: From objective to subjective**

Surprisingly and despite its many revised editions, Rosenblatt's landmark, *Literature as Exploration* (1938) was lost in the shuffle in the midst of the New Criticism that dominated the better part of the modern period of the twentieth century. Even in the postmodern period that followed, her work would remain relatively overlooked by theorist of the movement she preceded. Nonetheless, during the period from the 1960s through the 1980s, literary criticism rode the crest of the countercultural waves that swept through Western societies and the floodgates had opened, letting loose a flurry of critical works exploring the subjective nature of interpretive reading. In a world where conflicting and competing ideologies were calling out in louder and stronger voices, aided by advancements in communication technologies, it became increasingly difficult to accept the idea that a single objective interpretation of any social, cultural, political, or religious reality could sufficiently pacify the diversity that was becoming characteristic of a growing global awareness. Walter Truett Anderson's critique of postmodern culture, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (1990), traces the beginnings of cultural relativity back to the inquisitiveness of our early social scientists. "The anthropologists probably deserve much of the credit—or the blame—for bringing out into clear view the remarkable range of realities that exist in a world that, one would have thought, had but a single reality. The early anthropologists were the true pioneers of the twentieth century, going out in search of culture shock, exposing themselves to it in the same valiantly careless way scientists might expose themselves to disease" (p. 37). While such explorers of culture may not have invented postmodernism in the Western world, they at



least assisted in bringing about a consciousness that set the stage for multiple interpretations of reality.

To illustrate Goodman's theory of miscue analysis, I referred to my reading of a passage from Handelman's *The Slayers of Moses* (1982), but one of the reasons I was reading this book in the first place was to examine some of the roots of postmodern thought. What Handelman reveals is that many elements in the theories of thinkers such as Freud, Lacan, Bloom and Derrida, namely concepts of subjective interpretations of text and reality, are not only not *post*-modern; they are not even modern:

The world of time and space is connected to realms beyond time and space through Torah, and every verse, letter, and son contains, therefore, a plurality of meanings and references, applicable not only to Biblical time and place, but to all time and place. Through proper interpretation, then, the application and meaning appropriate for any contingency is revealed. Thus interpretation is not essentially separate from the text itself—an external act intruded upon it—but rather the *extension* of the text, the uncovering of the connective network of relations, a part of the continuous revelation of the text itself: at bottom, another aspect of the text.

(p. 39)

One of the predominant themes Handelman emphasizes is that three of the four theorists she examines—Freud, Bloom and Derrida—are Jewish, and that traditional Rabbinic scholarship is coming from more of an Oriental than Occidental tradition. Thus it is no accident that the works of these scientists, critics and philosophers would adopt methods of thinking in line with their own cultural heritage. The subjective nature of textual interpretation was nothing new to Eastern thought, but when it became more prevalent in

the West, it was seen as something new and *modern* with writers such as Freud, and later seen as *post-modern* with writers such as Bloom and Derrida. This is not to say that all Jewish writers are writing from an Eastern perspective or are connected to the rabbinical tradition, but that in the case of these theorists, the connection is apparent.

One of the greater ironies in literary criticism during the twentieth century is how its trends were working adversely to movements taking place in the physical sciences. While New Critics were taking cues from scientific methods in order to make literary interpretation as objective as possible, Einstein was more than two decades into redefining the Universe as a place in which perceptions of reality changed in relation to an observer's position in space and time. It may or may not be relevant to note that Einstein was also Jewish. Ironically, while science was coming to grips with the inevitable subjective wall that it would forevermore bump up against, literary critics, who were already positioned to welcome such revelations, made a U-turn in the opposite direction. This is a baffling notion when considering other art movements of the modern period such as cubism, surrealism and later abstract expressionism in painting, or blues and jazz in music, which based their existence on improvisation and individual interpretation. In Rosenblatt's fifth edition of *Literature as Exploration* (1995):

The social sciences share the tentativeness of any scientific finding. Since the 1970s, the development of Einsteinian and subatomic physics has led to a change in the scientific atmosphere. Without denying the effectiveness of the older Newtonian physics for some problems, the new paradigm assumes that humankind is not separate from nature but a part of it, transacting with the environment. This does not deny the value of the objective approach but affirms

that there are no absolute scientific truths, that any observation presupposes an observer with particular assumptions or interests. (p. 132)

In *Subjective Criticism* (1978), David Bleich also mentions principals of relativity in order to emphasize the importance of the individual interpretation. "Einstein's relativity, which is based on the universal invariance of the speed of light, forced us to believe that hitherto, invariant perimeters of space, time, and mass must now be conceived as variable, depending on the frame of reference from which we are observing them" (p. 16). Rather than find ways to obtain a scientific approach to defining meaning, he traces the shift as establishing a need for not only science, but the humanities as well, to move from an objective to a subjective paradigm, and this move he sees as not only expansive, but also liberating. "Under the subjective paradigm, new truth is created by a new use of language and a new structure of thought. The establishment of new knowledge is the activity of the intellectual mind adapting itself to ontogenetic and phylogenetic developmental demands. Knowledge is made by people and not found" (p. 18). It is this notion of knowledge being created rather than discovered that fuels both interactive reading models and reader response criticism, and echoes Rosenblatt's transactional reading model where the reader and text work together to establish meaning. Bleich also finds it ironic that literary criticism would be moving in the opposite direction of the hard sciences during this same period of time:

There has never been any doubt that literary criticism was a major constituent of the humanistic disciplines we have traditionally understood as hermeneutic. Yet at the very time when Mannheim, Freud, and the physical scientists were looking to subjective forms of thought to better authorize knowledge, criticism turned in the

opposite direction, emphasizing the "scientific" attitude, featuring the objective autonomy of a work of art. Having no language to rationalize and organize older forms of topical impressionistic criticism, "new" critics tried to hypostasize a literary text as a document with an internally coherent objective meaning. (p. 33)

While it is understandable that in a period of rapid scientific advancement scholars in the humanities would fall in with the spirit of the times, it is ironic that they would forgo a subjective view of reality that physicists were beginning to understand as unavoidable.

In exploring the parallels between Western physics and Eastern philosophy and religion, Fritjof Capra (1975) discusses language in a manner that sounds very much like postmodern literary criticism. "Since words are always an abstract, approximate map of reality, the verbal interpretations of a scientific experiment or of a mystical insight are necessarily inaccurate and incomplete. Modern physicists and Eastern mystics alike are well aware of this fact" (p. 41). In essence, our entire perception of the universe, like language itself, is indeterminate. "Since space and time are now reduced to the subjective role of the elements of the language a particular observer uses for his or her description of natural phenomena, each observer will describe the phenomena in a different way" (p. 167).<sup>5</sup> What Capra is pointing out in his discussion of science and religion is a theme that would become central to postmodern literary theory. Not only is reality based on the subjective interpretation of the observer, but also all that the observer has to describe this reality is "inaccurate and incomplete" language. Language is

---

<sup>5</sup> Einstein (1949) was actually a quarter of a century ahead of Capra in making this connection between physics and Oriental mysticism. "The beginnings of cosmic religious feeling already appear in earlier stages of development—e.g., in many of the Psalms of David and in some of Prophets. Buddhism, as we have learnt from the wonderful writings of Schopenhauer especially, contains a much stronger element of it" (p. 26).

inaccurate and incomplete because ultimately, all it can refer to is itself; it is simultaneously the signifier and the referent resulting in a confounding paradox that becomes the struggle to define meaning.

### **Reflexivity: The paradox of meaning**

The bind New Critics were trying to get out of, which physicists and later postmodern critics had succumbed to, was the realization that meaning itself cannot be objectively defined. For the very reason that meaning only exists in language, it can only be referred to with language, and therefore can never describe or refer to the existence of anything outside of itself.<sup>6</sup> Even in the act of non-verbal communication, say waving good-bye or sending someone a dozen roses, the mental process of decoding the meaning of the message in the mind happens in the form of language. In an attempt to escape this entanglement when discussing elements of language, we create metalanguages, languages that describe other forms of language. This is not problematic when discussing specific aspects of language such as grammatical elements or literary techniques. The problems arise when we step back to where we want to define and analyze the whole of language itself. At this level, the use of a metalanguage necessarily results in the creation of another metalanguage to describe the former, thus entering a cycle with no foreseeable

---

<sup>6</sup> One analogy I've always liked is the infinite regression that comes from holding two mirrors face to face. A mirror is an object that reflects an image projected onto it. When you look into a mirror and see your reflection, there is a completed definition. The mirror is not you, and you are not a mirror, so the image the mirror shows you is only a representation of you. It refers *to* you, but is not mistaken *as* you. However, when you hold a mirror up to another mirror to get a reflection or representation of a mirror, what you get is an infinite regression, a continuous attempt on the part of the mirror to define a mirror. The definition is no longer a simple reflection, but rather a self-referential reflexive representation that can never be completed. When a mirror projects itself onto another mirror as a means of defining itself, what it sees is itself reflecting itself reflecting back on itself ad infinitum.

finality. Ultimately the whole of linguistic discourse is relegated to the Moebius loop of propagating metalanguages.

This struggle to define meaning is a puzzle that literary critics have been grappling with throughout the modern and postmodern periods. Richards (1924) warns that too often thoughts are considered to be the objects to which words are referents. "The mere sight of any familiar word is normally followed by a thought of whatever the word may stand for. This thought is sometimes said to be the 'meaning', the literal or prose 'meaning' of the word. It is wise, however, to avoid the use of 'meaning' as a symbol altogether. The terms 'thought' and 'idea' are less subtle in their ambiguities, and when defined may perhaps be used without confusion" (p. 125). Richards along with C. K. Ogden (1953), grapple with the very theory of definition:

Firstly, do we define things or words? To decide this point we have only to notice that if we speak about defining words we refer to something very different from what is referred to, meant, by 'defining things.' When we define *words* we take another set of words which may be used with the same referent as the first, *i.e.*, we substitute a symbol which will be better understood in a given situation. With *things*, on the other hand, no such substitution is involved. A so-called definition of a horse as opposed to the definition of the word 'horse,' is a statement about it enumerating properties by means of which it may be compared with and distinguished from other things. There is thus no rivalry between 'verbal' and 'real' definition. (p. 110)

Although Ogden and Richards see a clear distinction between defining a word and defining the object to which the word is a referent, what the postmodern critics would

conclude in the following decades is that there is no difference between a verbal and a real definition of any word. By coming to this realization, they grapple with the self-referential reflexive puzzle that leads to the concession that all language is intertextual and subjective. No matter how many metalanguages are invented to describe the meaning of another referent, when attempting to define the meaning of language, which is synonymous to describing the meaning of meaning, one cannot avoid reflexive paradoxes. As Bleich puts it, "The problem has been that the study of language enacts our condition of subjectivity. Because we think in language, it is not possible to think about language as an object" (p. 39). This is something Smith is well aware of in his psycholinguistic approach to reading:

One cannot *say* what meaning is in general, any more than one can say what the meaning of a particular word or group is, except by saying other words which are themselves surface structure. The meaning itself can never be exposed. This inability to pin down meaning is not a theoretical defect or scientific oversight. We should not hope that a marvelous discovery will be made one day to enable us all to say what meanings are. Meaning, to repeat myself, cannot be captured in a net of words. (p. 158-9)

And even Bloomfield was aware early on in his behaviorist writings about the endless ladder of metalanguages that would forever need to be constructed in attempts to define language and meaning:

Although the linguist cannot define meanings, but must appeal for this to students of other sciences or to common knowledge, yet, in many cases, having obtained definitions for some forms, he can define the meanings of other forms in terms of

these first ones. The mathematician, for instance, who is here acting as a linguist, cannot define such terms as *one* and *add*, but if we give him a definition of these, he can define *two* ('one added to on'), *three* ('one added to two'), and so on, without end. (p. 145-6)

The problem of course is that no matter how many metalanguages are created to describe and point to language or the meaning of language, the referent can never be objectified because the signifier and referent are one and the same entity: language. In *The Act of Reading* (1978), what Wolfgang Iser sees as problematic with critics working within an objective paradigm is the unending need to find the ultimate meaning of the referent somewhere in the text. Meaning is ultimately an image that cannot be adequately expressed in words:

The image ... does not represent something that exists; on the contrary, it brings into existence something that is to be found neither outside the book nor on its printed pages ... Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension ... As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced. (p. 9-10)

Iser, like Rosenblatt before him, sees meaning as the result of the interaction between a reader and a text, though it is important to re-emphasize that Rosenblatt (1985) is adamant over the distinction between a transaction and an interaction. Her argument is that historically the term transaction fits into more organic models, so reader and text are part of the same entity that creates meaning. Interaction is more associated with



information processing theory, which she sees as more mechanical. Top-down and bottom-up models imply individual and isolated “elements acting on one another” (p. 100). For my money, she is splitting semantic hairs in light of the fact that reader response critics, psycholinguists, as well as Rosenblatt herself insist that interpreting text is a process the reader can only succeed at if she can adequately use her background knowledge. Regardless of which term is more suitable for the process, what Iser sees as important is the resulting gestalt, “a product of the interaction between text and reader, [which] cannot be exclusively traced back either to the written text or to the disposition of the reader. Now psycholinguistic experiments have shown that meanings cannot be grasped merely by the direct or indirect decoding of letters or words, but can only be compiled by means of groupings” (p. 119). It is interesting to note that Iser is one of the few if not the only literary critic who pays a nod to psycholinguistics, specifically the work of Smith.

The question in regards to the shifting status of the reader from objective to subjective models of text is simply that each individual reader can only approach any given text with the prior knowledge she has acquired from all previous texts in which she has come in contact. If, as Smith says, meaning “cannot be captured down in a net of words,” then we are necessarily stuck with subjective interpretations of everything we read. What is at stake is that each reader becomes ultimately responsible for her own interpretation. Any interpretation of a text by an individual reader will be essentially a synthesis based on prior texts and experiences. The paradox that arises however is that while the reader is responsible for her own interpretation, neither she nor the text can escape their connection to every other text that may impact the transaction/interaction

between them. It might be helpful to look at an example of how multiple interpretations of the same text can both be valid and correct, and to do this, I will use one of the most indelible stories in American fiction, L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*.

### ***The Wizard of Oz* and intertextuality**

Intertextuality is at the root of reader response theory as well as interactive reading models. It is a prerequisite of top-down models of learning that newly acquired knowledge and interpretations of input are based on prior knowledge, primarily other texts. As a result, it hardly makes sense to argue that any interpretation of any given text would not have some relationship to previous texts that the reader has read. One example of this is the numerous interpretations and metaphors that have been made of *The Wizard of Oz*. One of the most influential and controversial papers written on the meaning behind the seemingly innocuous children's story is an article published by Henry M. Littlefield titled, *The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism* (1964). In short, Littlefield sees the entire story as symbolic of the populist struggles occurring from the American Midwest to Washington D.C. at the end of the nineteenth century. The yellow brick road represents the gold standard, the Emerald City is Washington and Dorothy's silver slippers (changed to ruby for the MGM movie so they would show up better on screen) represent US currency. The Scarecrow is the American farmer, the Tin Man the labor unions, and the Cowardly Lion is three-time failed Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.

In 1998, Joey Green published *The Zen of Oz: Ten Spiritual Lessons from Over the Rainbow*. Even though he focuses more on the MGM film version than the book,

Green takes the very same story and interprets Dorothy's journey through Oz as a Buddhist spiritual journey. The Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion are not only on their own individual quests, but also represent the coming together of Dorothy's mind, heart and courage as she travels the road of life to find herself. The good witch, Glinda, is a Zen master who gives Dorothy the mantra "follow the yellow brick road" as a meditation to keep her focused as she follows the path searching for her way.

The Littlefield and Green interpretations of *The Wizard of Oz* are merely two examples of a vast list of both scholarly and trivial critiques of a story that has become ingrained in the American lexicon, but is either of these interpretations revealing or insightful? Is it possible that both can be acceptable at the same time? For a reader response critic, the answer to both questions is, of course, yes. Both of these interpretations came as a result of Littlefield and Green's transaction/interaction with the *Oz* text. Littlefield comes to the text with a background and interest in American Populism. Green comes to the same text with background knowledge in Zen Buddhism. The metaphors and symbols they find in the story do not exist until they as readers bring them into the reading event, but what about Baum's actual intentions? Since Littlefield's article was published in 1964, there has been an ever-increasing body of work delving into Baum's knowledge and interest in populism, as well as his life in general. David Parker (1996) finds that Baum was very interested in Theosophy and spiritualism that would lend more credence to Green's interpretation. Robert Venables (1990) uncovers evidence in Baum's career as a newspaper editor that he was a horrible racist who all but calls for the complete extermination of Native Americans. In his own introduction to the story, Baum states, "*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was written solely to pleasure children

of today.” The question, then, is how does any or all of this information into Baum’s personal history affect the meaning of his text? The short answer is not at all. Once the text is written, the author is all but out of the picture as far as interpretive meaning. *The Wizard of Oz* is a parable on American Populism because Littlefield has found the intertextual evidence that makes it so. It is also a guide to Zen spiritualism because Green has found the textual parallels that point to *Oz* being a symbolic parable akin to Eastern mysticism and philosophy. Whether Baum himself knew or cared much about populism, Buddhism or was an Indian-hating racist has little if any relevance on the meaning of the text he produced much past the point he laid his pen down. What does matter is the meaning that is created as a result of readers applying their own personal knowledge to their interpretation of the story.

### **Not everything goes**

From the above example it might quickly be assumed that proponents of reader response criticism are making the argument that any and every interpretation one reader comes up with is as acceptable and valid as any and every other interpretation reached by any and every other reader. And it has been the fear of such a seemingly anarchistic slant that has warranted criticism of much of postmodern thought. Yet nearly every critic and theorist of these two reading models being reviewed are quick to point out that not everything goes. While the meaning of a text is contingent on a transaction/interaction with an individual reader, the background knowledge from which that interpretation is formed comes from the reader’s transaction/interaction with the world around her. The influences of her family, community, schools, exposure to media, and all the other texts

she has read come into play each time she sits down to read. Bleich points to how the collective mind of a community transcends whatever initial intent the author of a text may have had:

A community of thinkers is both the original synthesizer and the final authority for the resymbolization and its ranges of applicability and value. An adequate explanation may or may not meet the criteria of predictability or repeatability. But if the community finds the explanation satisfactory for its own needs, this alone is enough to render it adequate. It is a moot question whether superstitions disappear because they have been discovered to be 'erroneous' beliefs, or because the beliefs have come into conflict with more urgent adaptive demands in the community. (p. 39)

Rosenblatt makes this same point in regards to every reader's own experience with multiple readings of a single text and how that should translate into making students in the classroom aware of the need for their interpretations to be educated and informed:

There is in fact, nothing in the recognition of the personal nature of literature that requires an acceptance of the notion that every evocation from a text is as good as every other. We need only think of our successive readings of the same text, at fifteen or thirty or fifty, to know that we can differentiate. Undisciplined, irrelevant, or distorted emotional responses and the lack of relevant experience or knowledge will, of course, lead to inadequate interpretations of the text. The aim is to help the student toward a more and more controlled, more and more valid or defensible response to the text. (p. 267)

Therefore, if a student reading *Don Quixote* is making allusions to airplane propellers as Quixote gets caught in windmill blades, it should be the responsibility of the teacher and classmates alike to remind this reader that humans had not mastered flight at the end of the sixteenth century, and it is quite unlikely that Cervantes could have foreseen the coming of the Wright Brothers.

Umberto Eco comments on this same point in *The Role of the Reader* (1979). He distinguishes between the level of openness an interpretation can have based on the openness of the text itself, and what determines the level of openness has much to do with the historical context in which the text was created. He sees a great difference in the possible number of interpretations for a text written by Dante in the early fourteenth century and that of Kafka or Joyce who write in the early twentieth century. Where the latter authors are writing within an existential and modern context, thus encouraging a less exhaustive realm of interpretations, the farther back writing goes, the more its acceptable interpretations are constricted to the historical knowledge we have of the period in which it was written:

The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is 'open' to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. Indeed, according to how he feels at one particular moment, the reader might choose a possible interpretative key which strikes him as exemplary of this spiritual state ...

However, in this type of operation, 'openness' is far removed from meaning 'indefiniteness' of communication, 'infinite' possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions, and these never allow the

reader to move outside the strict control of the author ... The meaning of allegorical figures and emblems which the medieval reader is likely to encounter is already prescribed by his encyclopedias, bestiaries, and lapidaries. Any symbolism is objectively defined and organized into a system. (p. 51-2)

Ultimately there has to be a sufficient level of consensus as to the credibility of any interpretation. And it is important to emphasize that neither reader response theories in literary criticism nor interactive reading models in applied linguistics intended to open the doors to any and every interpretation in their shifts away from New Criticism and behaviorism.

This is in no way an exhaustive review of the work of every reader response critic. What I have done is focus on works that highlight the central themes of this overall theory. The shift from objective to subjective definitions of textual reality, the reflexive paradox that enfolds attempts to define the meaning of language, the intertextuality of language based on readers' background knowledge and the emphasis that none of these characteristics of text guarantees that any and every reader's interpretation is necessarily acceptable are problems that also faced the psycholinguists in their development of interactive reading models.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Up to this point, I have traced the historical parallels between interactive reading models and reader response criticism, examining how they have challenged the methods and theories of the preceding models from which they developed: behaviorism in linguistics and new criticism in literary criticism. This final chapter will explore what impact the two theories have had on each other, for here is where a significant imbalance is found. While applied linguists working in the field of second language acquisition have drawn on the work of several postmodern literary critics in developing and applying interactive reading models in the classroom, literary critics have hardly reciprocated. For the most part, writing from the field of literary criticism seems to have been all but blind to the work of psycholinguistics and interactive reading, proving the connection between the two theories to be virtually a one-way street.

As I mentioned earlier, had I studied literature rather than applied linguistics, it is unlikely that I would have become aware of the interactive reading models developed by psycholinguists. Throughout my literary scholarship, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, I have never come across research referring to L2 acquisition. However, as a student of literacy in second language acquisition, I have frequently come across sources that cite theories in literature, and this is a pattern that is consistent throughout the research of the two theories being reviewed in this thesis. Whatever crossover exists between these disciplines is due to applied linguists recognizing the work of literary critics, and not vice versa. This would not in itself be so important except for



the fact that interactive reading models and reader response criticism are so similar in their historical development as well as their overall premises as theories of reading.

### **Recognition in the research: Which hand knows what the other is doing?**

My own introduction to reader response criticism came about in a passage from an ESL textbook on teaching methods that connected to the concept of interactive reading (Richard-Amato, 1996). To my surprise, when I began scouring the bibliographies of the literary critics and theorists, I found no references that lead back to research in applied linguistics. In 1980, Jane Tompkins edited *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*, which includes the writing of several literary critics covered in this thesis along with that of others (e.g. Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Walker Gibson, Norman Holland, Walter Benn Michaels, Georges Poulet, Gerald Prince, and Michael Riffaterre). In tracing these writers' theoretical developments, the only psycholinguistic work Tompkins lists in the annotated bibliography is Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (1971). Wolfgang Iser is the only other literary critic discussed in this thesis that acknowledges the work of the psycholinguists, and his nod is also to this one work by Smith. This same trend carries over into the pedagogical writings as well. In Nicholas Karolides' *Reader Response in the Classroom* (1992), in chapters by nineteen writers, there is no mention of research or writing in applied linguistics.

From the other side of the street, the recognitions second language pedagogy pays to literary criticism are relatively prevalent. Ruth Spack (1985) latched onto the debate that raged throughout the 1980s as to the place of literature in the composition classroom and extended it to literature's place in the ESL classroom. In doing so, she cites

Rosenblatt, Bleich, and a host of other literary critics promoting reader response theories.

“The object of study—the work of literature—was believed to be unaffected by the reader’s attempt to understand it. Not until two or three decades later did response theorists and researchers recognize what Rosenblatt had tried to tell them: that individual responses to literary works could be valid as authoritative, formal techniques of literary interpretation (Bleich 1980)” (p. 708). Joanne Devine (1988) begins the concluding chapter of *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* with an acknowledgement of Rosenblatt’s recognition of the reader’s role in creating meaning.

“Rosenblatt (1978), Widdowson (1979), and others have argued persuasively that successful reading is an act of creation: the reader *creates* meaning through the interaction with a text” (p. 260). As Iser is one of the few literary critics to recognize the work of applied linguists, James Davis (1989) returns the favor by discussing how the concepts in Iser’s *The Act of Reading* can be applied to the foreign language classroom. He sees Iser’s model of an implied reader, a theoretical reader that possesses all the linguistic and cultural traits necessary to experience the full effect of a literary work, as being an ideal concept to apply to foreign language learners:

Using Iser’s implied reader as a standard provides clearer notions of the kinds of knowledge typically lacking when the intermediate-level student encounters a literary selection in the foreign language ... Iserian theory includes the linguistic, historical-cultural, and literary knowledge requisite to understanding the instructions provided in a narrative ... the importance of these elements is supported by many other theoretical and empirical studies. (p. 422)

Because Iser takes into account the work of psycholinguistics in the development of his own theories, the way he lays out his theories are easily applicable to methods of teaching second language acquisition. I think as a general rule, L2 teachers have to contend with the grammatical, vocabulary, and syntactic features of language as well as the social, cultural and historical features on a more intense level than literature instructors teaching L1 students do. These latter factors of language can never be taken for granted in an L2 classroom to the extent that they might be when teaching native speakers.

Vivian Zamel (1992) expands the list of writers from whom she draws theoretical notions of reader response criticism that illustrate parallels between reading and writing processes in order to support her argument for incorporating more writing into reading classrooms. She points to theorists in literature and rhetoric who “represent the ways in which the process of reading has been characterized by writers whose work is situated in a range of disciplines but whose conceptualizations of reading reveal a remarkably similar perspective” (p. 467). Among her chosen excerpts are quotes from Rosenblatt and Fish, but the short and sweet quote from Tierney and Pearson (1983) sum up the overall concept on which Zamel is focusing: “There is no meaning on the page until a reader decides there is” (p. 467). As recently as 1996, Alan Hirvela was making the connection between second language teaching and reader response theory. In “Reader-response theory and ELT” (English Language Teaching), he discusses how reader response theory is well-suited for the second language classroom because not only are students determining the meaning a certain given text, but are also exploring the meaning of the entire reading experience:

Because this approach is interested in the learner's entire experience of the reader-text transaction, i.e. the full story of reading of a learner, any discourse produced is seen as a stepping stone toward additional, connected discourse. Discourse is therefore not produced in a vacuum, as can occur when it is the end rather than the means of a task; instead, it is seen in the context of the complete story of reading, and serves as a point of departure for further and related discourse production. (p. 131)

To an extent, Hirvela is touching on the concept of self-referentiality discussed above. Not only should readers become concerned with the text at hand, but also the entire process of what reading is. By creating meaning *with* the text rather than extracting meaning *from* it, the student not only explores the text, but explores her own knowledge. She establishes an understanding of the relationship between herself and the text, and ultimately grasps an understanding of her relationship with the target language in which she is producing discourse. By recognizing the process of reading, she will also become aware of the process of her own learning and acquisition of language.

That a reader's interpretation of a text can be too subjective is a legitimate concern, especially in the second language classroom. While it might be to the benefit of students in a literature class to explore as many interpretations of a fictional work as possible in order to expand the realm of potential meaning, the function of second language instruction is to assist students in the acquiring a proficiency level that will allow them to function in a community where the target language is predominantly spoken. In this sense it may seem that the goals of the two disciplines are contradictory; postmodern literary criticism pushing the boundaries of a text's meaning, and applied

linguistics working to direct students to a common understanding of the same texts. The idea is not to overload the L2 student with multiple interpretations of a poetic work; rather the focus of interactive reading models is to encourage her to rely on the knowledge she already possesses. She should recognize that even though her L2 knowledge is limited, everything else she knows is valid and useful in acquiring L2 proficiency.

### **Postmodern credibility: Affirmation from the L2 classroom**

However, even if it is the goal of the L2 classroom to bring students from various cultural and language backgrounds to a desired proficiency level in the target level, language teachers should not linguistically homogenize their students. Vivian Cook (1999) suggests that there is a need in the L2 classroom to rethink the status and legitimacy of the individual characteristics of the target language being produced by L2 students. Because L2 learners have different cultural and social backgrounds that the native speakers of a target language, it can only be expected that their individual experiences are going to affect the tenor of the L2 being produced. "People cannot be expected to conform to the norm of a group to which they do not belong, whether groups are defined by race, class, sex, or any other feature. People who speak differently from some arbitrary group are not speaking better or worse, just differently" (p. 194). This shift of perspective is refreshing in the sense that by acknowledging the legitimacy of the variations in L2 learners' production of a target language, a sense of empowerment is being created. If L2 learners understand that as students of the target language they are not merely attempting to acquire the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the language,

but are also contributing to the progress and development of the language, they are less likely to be intimidated by the language learning process. I see this as one of the most important lessons of interactive reading models and reader response criticism; the reader is creating meaning with the text, not extracting meaning from it.

However, there is often a tension between the constraints and the mobility of the target language students are acquiring. In order to make the most of students' background knowledge it might be better to have them read a story from their own culture in translation. If Korean students studying English in the United States read a familiar Korean folk tale, they can better focus on the grammatical, lexical and syntactical elements of English because they already understand the content of the story, hence greater mobility in the target language. On the other hand, if students are only reading texts with familiar content, acclimation into the target culture will take that much longer because there is no content about the United States in the texts, hence greater constraints on their language acquisition. If L2 students can make a gradual transition from texts with which they are familiar, to texts that share similar content and themes in both cultures, to texts that are clearly indicative of the target culture, they can more easily carry their own culture with them as they adapt to their new environment. They are not merely relying on their background knowledge to create meaning with the texts they are reading, but ultimately using both background knowledge and newly acquired knowledge to further shape the culture as well as themselves. Through transacting with the texts, they transact with the culture and create meaning with it.

What were the literary critics missing by not being aware of the research and application of interactive reading models? Perhaps not much, although postmodern

thought has long been the target of parody and satire from members of academic institutions to pop culture entertainment, and much of it is well deserved. As recently as the July/August 2001 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, B. R. Myers attacks the incomprehensibility of postmodern fiction, and that due to the elitism of publishers and novelists alike, readers are willing to take the blame for their inability to tackle the texts. "In similar fashion, an amateur reviewer on Amazon.com admitted to having had trouble with Guterson's short stories: 'The fault is largely mine. I had been reading so many escape novels that I wasn't in shape to contend with stories full of real thought written in challenging style.' This is what the cultural elite wants us to believe: if our writers don't make sense, or bore us to tears, that can only mean that we aren't worthy of them" (p. 121). Regardless whether or not one agrees with Myers' conclusions on what are considered postmodern novels, the legitimacy of the term itself has long been a target for criticism, some of it justified, some of it not.

Scholars and instructors in literature may have benefited from a greater awareness of the work of their contemporaries in applied linguistics. There is a sense of urgency in the L2 classroom that does not necessarily emerge as frequently in the literature classroom. The ability to achieve linguistic proficiency in the dominant language of the culture in which one is living is crucial to both the social and economic prosperity of a community's residents, so the L2 student's motivation often exceeds simply wanting to further her education. If nothing else, the work of the psycholinguists along with the application of reader response models in the L2 classroom act as evidence that postmodern theory was not all convoluted and inaccessible prose written by the academic elite. This is not to say that the writings of the reader response critics reviewed are

convoluted and inaccessible, or that the New Critics and behaviorist theorists who preceded them were any more coherent in their writing. This is also not an indication that the writings in applied linguistics are quick and easy reading. Academic writing in general is often criticized for its inaccessibility and in many cases for good reason. “Postmodernism’s ambivalence about wholes carries over into a radical questioning of the very utility and justification of social theory. It does not help clarity in these matters that the term *theory* has become enshrined in academic literary circles as the name for those forms of thought that reject all the aims of traditional theorizing” (McGowan 1991, p. 22-3). At the very least, recognition on the part of postmodern theorists that elements of their theories have been applied in pragmatic and deliberate fashion might have been reassuring in an era of intense criticism and skepticism.

Since the heyday when these two theories held center stage in their respective disciplines, trends in the research of reading have certainly shifted. By the early 1990s, theorists were no longer thinking of reading as an individual act in which the transaction between reader and text is isolated from the rest of the world, but rather it is part of a larger social process. “The new approaches to literacy, on which Hill and Parry amongst others are drawing, reject the autonomous model and argue instead that literacy practices are in fact always embedded in social and cultural contexts and moreover they are not simply neutral artifacts but are always contested and ‘ideological’” (Street, 1993, p. 82). Much of postmodern literary theory has been based on the recognition of cultural and ideological multiplicities that exists in most industrial societies, and this has been emphasized by the increase in immigration and international student enrollment in the United States along with the subsequent boom in ESL instruction. Despite the fact that



these two reading models developed largely independent of each other, their mutual insistence on readers' subjective interpretations of texts based on individual background knowledge, galvanizes their theoretical significance as historical precursors to attempts in academic arenas to be more inclusive of diverse voices. With this diversity comes the challenge of achieving a balance between encouraging students to explore and express their voices, and channeling their concentration on material that must be processed and synthesized in ways that are socially relevant. Both of the reading methods reviewed in this thesis are models that provide opportunities to empower students by illustrating to them that they are as vital to establishing the meaning a text as the author who wrote it.

## REFERENCES:

- Anderson, W. T. (1990). *Reality isn't what it used to be*. New York: Harper San Francisco.
- Baum, L. F. (1900). *The wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
- Beckson, K, and Ganz, A. (1989). *Literary terms: A dictionary* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Bleich, D. (1978). *Subjective criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Brooks, C. Jr. & Penn Warren, R. (1938). *Understanding poetry: An anthology for college students*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Capra, F. (1999). *The Tao of physics: An exploration of the parallels between modern physics and eastern mysticism* (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition). Boston: Shambala.
- Carrell, P., Devine, J., & Eskey, D. (Eds.). (1988). *Interactive approaches to second language reading*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1959). Review of verbal behavior by B. F. Skinner. *Language*, 35, 26-58.
- Cobley, P., Jansz, L. (1997). *Introducing semiotics*. New York: Totem Books.
- Coe, R. M. (1987). An apology for form; or who took the form out of the process? *College English*, 49, 50-69.
- Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 185-209.

- Crystal, D. (1997). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Davis, J. N. (1989). The act of reading in the foreign language: Pedagogical implications of Iser's reader-response theory. *The Modern Language Journal*, 73, 420-428.
- Eco, U. (1979). *The role of the reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Einstein, A. (1949). *The world as I see it*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Derrida, J. (1991). At this very moment in this work here I am. In P. Kamuf (Ed.), *A Derrida reader: Between the blinds*. (R. Berezdivin, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1987)
- Finegan, E. (1994). *Language: Its structure and use*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Green, J. (1998). *The Zen of Oz: Ten spiritual lessons from over the rainbow*. Los Angeles: Renaissance Books.
- Goodman, K. S. (1970). *Reading: Process and program*. K. S. Goodman and O. S. Niles (Eds.). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Goodman, K. S. (1982). *Language and literacy*, Vol. 1. F. V. Gollasch (Ed.). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Goodman, K. S. (1996). *On reading: A common-sense look at the nature of language and the science of reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Handelman, S. A. (1982). *The slayers of Moses: The emergence of rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Hawkins, B. (1991). Teaching children to read in a second language. *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Hirvela, A. (1996). Reader-response theory and ELT. *ELT Journal*, 50, 127-135.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Karolides, N. J. (1992). *Reader response in the classroom: Evoking and interpreting meaning in literature*. New York: Longman.
- Littlefield, H. M. (1964). The wizard of Oz: Parable on populism. *American Quarterly*, 16, 47-58.
- McGowan, J. (1991). *Postmodernism and its critics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Myers, B. R. (2001), July/August. A Reader's Manifesto: An attack on the growing pretentiousness of American literary prose. *The Atlantic Monthly*. 104-122.
- Ogden, C. K., Richards, I. A. (1953). *The meaning of meaning*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc.
- Parker, D. B. (1996). Oz: L. Frank Baum's theosophical utopia. Paper delivered at the Kennesaw Academic Forum, April 1996.
- Ransom, J. C. (1941). *The new criticism*. Norfolk, CT.: New Directions.
- Richards, I. A. (1924). *Principles of literary criticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Richard-Amato, P. (1996). *Making it happen, interaction in the second language classroom*. White Plains: Addison-Wesley.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.

- Rosenblatt, L. (1985). Viewpoints: transaction versus interaction—a terminological rescue operation. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 19, 96-107.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration*. (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Rumelhart, D. E. (1977). Toward an interactive model of reading. In *Attention and performance*, Vol. 6, S. Dornic (Ed.), 573-603. New York: Academic Press.
- Rumelhart, D. E. (1980). Schemata: the building blocks of cognition. *Theoretical issues in reading comprehension*, R.J. Spiro, B. C. Bruce, and W. F. Brewer (Eds.). Hillsdale, NJ.: Erlbaum. 33-58.
- Skinner, B. F. (1972). *Cumulative record: A selection of papers*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Meredith.
- Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About behaviorism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Smith, F. (1982). *Understanding reading: A psycholinguistic analysis of reading and learning to read*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Spack, R. (1985). Literature, reading, writing, and ESL: Bridging the gaps. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 703-725.
- Street, B. V. (1993). The new literacy studies, guest editorial. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 16, 81-97.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1854). *Walden*. New York: Signet Classics
- Tompkins, J. P. (1980). *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Venables, R. (1990). Looking back at Wounded Knee 1890. *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, 7, 36-37.

Wellek, R. & Warren, A. (1942). *Theory of literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Zamel, V. (1992). Writing one's way into reading. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 463-485.